V
Tearmoon Empire
Nozomu Mochitsuki
Illustrator: Gilse

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As described in The Chronicles of Saint Princess Mia

# Characters

## Tearmoon Empire

### Miabel

Mia's future granddaughter who leapt backward through time. Goes by "Bel."

Granddaughter and Grandmother

Archnemesis

### Mia

Protagonist. The sole princess of the empire. Ex-selfish brat. Actually a coward. A revolution leads to her execution, but she somehow leaps back through time and wakes up a twelve-year-old again. She successfully avoids a repeat encounter with the guillotine, but then Bel shows up...

Revolution

Archnemesis

### Tiona

The eldest daughter of Outcount Rudolvon. Looks up to Mia. In the previous timeline, she led the revolutionary army.

### Cyril

Tiona's younger brother. Super smart.

**Outcount Rudolvon's Family**

### Ludwig

Young, motivated government official. Sharp tongue. Ardently believes in Mia and is trying to make her Empress.

Archnemesis

### Anne

Mia's maid. Born into a poor family of merchants. Mia's loyal subject.

### Dion

The strongest knight in the Empire. In the previous timeline, he was Mia's executioner.

### Ruby

The daughter of the Duke of Redmoon. A gallant lady with a wardrobe to match.

### Esmeralda

The eldest daughter of the House of Greenmoon. Self-proclaimed best friend of Mia.

**The Four Dukes' Families**

### Sapphias

The eldest son of the House of Bluemoon. Got into the student council thanks to Mia.

※ ——— Future Timeline Relationship

※ ····· Previous Timeline Relationship

## Kingdom of Sunkland

### Keithwood

Prince Sion's attendant. A cynic. But a competent one.

### Sion

Assistance

Crown Prince. All-round genius. In the previous timeline he was Mia's archnemesis, aided Tiona and eventually became known as the "Penal King." In the present he accepts that Mia is the Great Sage of the Empire.

**[Wind Crows]** Sunkland's intelligence service.

**[White Crows]** A team within the Wind Crows formed for a certain project.

## Holy Principality of Belluga

Support

Support

### Rafina

The Duke's daughter. Saint-Noel Academy's student council president and the school's de facto decision maker. In the previous timeline, she supported Sion and Tiona from behind the scenes. Her smile can be lethal.

**[Saint-Noel Academy]**

A super elite school attended by all the highborn children of neighboring nations.

## Kingdom of Remno

### Abel

Second Prince. In the previous timeline, he was known to be an extraordinary playboy. Now, as a result of meeting Mia, he works to diligently improve his swordsmanship instead.

**Forkroad & Co.**

### Chloe

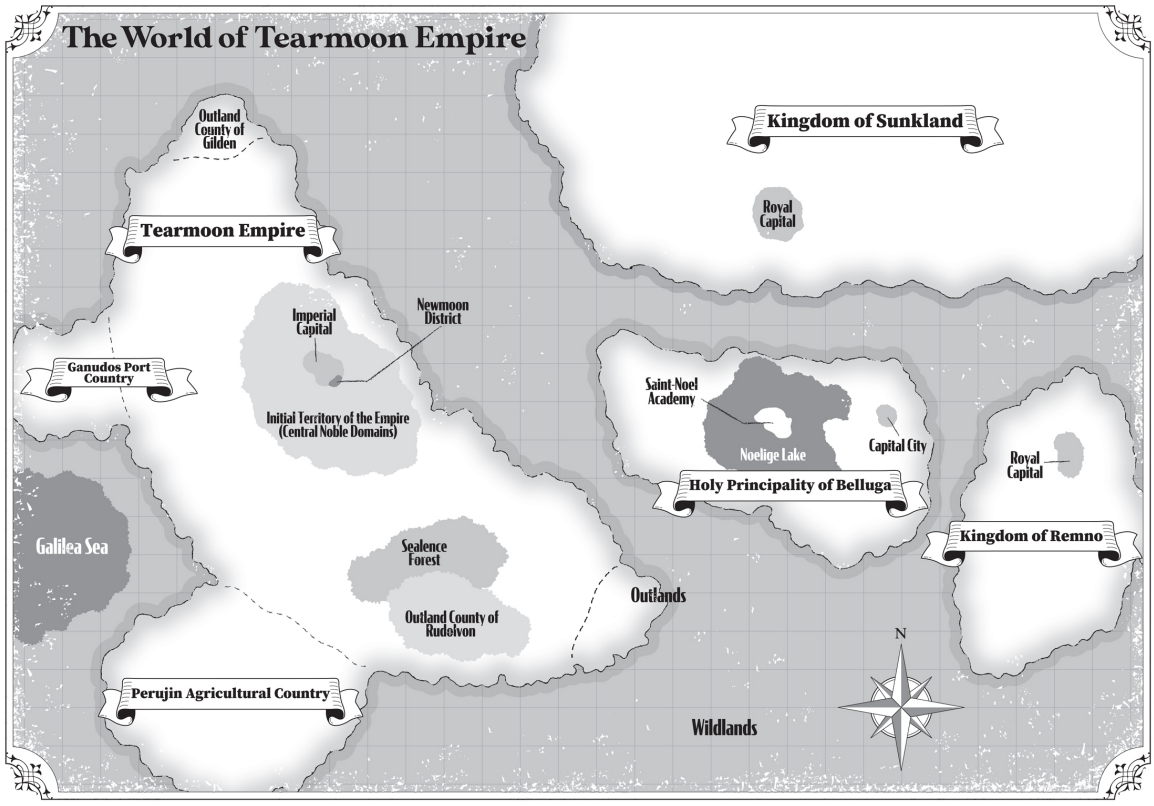
The only heir of Marco Forkroad, whose company spans multiple kingdoms. She is Mia's classmate and book buddy.

## Chaos Serpents

A group of chaosmongers trying to wreak havoc upon the world. They are deeply hostile toward the Holy Principality of Belluga and the Central Orthodox Church. Traces of their clandestine misdeeds can be found throughout history, but the details are shrouded in mystery.

## Story

Mia, the reviled selfish princess of the fallen Tearmoon Empire, is executed, only to wake up a twelve-year-old again after somehow leaping backward through time. With this second chance at life she resolves to fix the ills that plague the Empire... so she doesn't end up at the guillotine again. With the help of her previous life's memories and a healthy dose of overly-generous interpretation of her actions by those around her, she successfully averts a revolution, only to be told by her time-leaping granddaughter, Bel, that in the future Mia and her entire lineage end in ruin. As her first step toward averting this terrible fate, Mia runs for president of Saint-Noel Academy's student council and miraculously clinches the win.


The World of Tearmoon Empire
Outland County of Gilden
Kingdom of Sunkland
Royal Capital
Tearmoon Empire
Imperial Capital
Newmoon District
Ganudos Port Country
Saint-Noel Academy
Noelige Lake
Capital City
Royal Capital
Initial Territory of the Empire (Central Noble Domains)
Holy Principality of Belluga
Galilea Sea
Kingdom of Remno
Sealence Forest
Outlands
Outland County of Rudolvon
N
Perujin Agricultural Country
Wildlands

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# Part 2: The Lodestar Girl III

## Prologue: Bel and Her Small Piece of Happiness I

*It was a summer that Princess Mia Luna Tearmoon would not soon forget. On invitation from Esmeralda Etoile Greenmoon, the proud Etoiler whose father was one of the empire's Four Dukes, she went on a cruise, which turned out to be quite the adventure. After a night on an uninhabited island spent sheltering from a sudden storm, Mia and her friends found themselves separated from their ship. Then, after a second night, they woke up with one of their members missing...*

At that, Elise Littstein put down her pen and pursed her lips.

"Hm... To be honest, I don't know about this..."

She was currently in the process of consolidating all the stories that her sister, Anne, had told her, and *phew*, they were something else. Next, Mia's group would venture underground and encounter the vengeful ghosts of cultists which, through Mia's heroic efforts, they'd manage to fend off. After that, they would do battle with a colossal man-eating fish before successfully pulling off a daring escape. Which all made for gripping content, but...

"Isn't this a bit too...exaggerated? I mean, I don't doubt that Mia would, theoretically, have the guts to stare down vengeful ghost-cultists and the brains to subdue them, but claiming she'd performed a literal exorcism is a little much. Same goes for this big fish she fought. It just...strains credulity."

Her sister had claimed the thing was the size of *two* Emerald Stars, but Elise found it difficult to believe that a fish could be twice as big as a ship.

“She must have been scared to death when it happened. The shock alone was probably enough to mess with her memories... I’d say this colossal man-eating fish was at most the size of one Emerald Star. Especially considering how Mia apparently punched it into submission. Anything bigger would be, well...not really punchable.”

Elise considered herself a strict nonfiction writer. As a scribe of truth, she deemed it important to avoid exaggeration as much as possible and relay only that which was rooted in fact. To that end...

“I do want to include every last detail of her incredible feats, but hyperbolic reporting will only hurt my credibility as a writer. My accounts need to be authentic and trustworthy. For this part, it’s probably best to play it safe and include only the more plausible events... I think I’ll make the battle with the colossal man-eating fish the main story and reframe everything else around that...”

“Mother Elise? What are you doing?”

A voice, young and sweet, roused her from her thoughts. She turned to the speaker.

“Oh, Bel, you’re up already? Good morning.”

Before her stood a young girl with beautiful hair the color of white gold. Her features were deeply reminiscent of those of the late Great Sage of the Empire. The girl, Miabel, pattered over to Elise, and regarded the pen on the desk with a curious expression.

“Are you writing about grandmother?”

“Yes, I am. It’s my job to make sure future generations will know what she accomplished.”

She almost added “and to protect you,” but swallowed the words at the last minute. So many had already perished doing the same. Miabel’s mother... The loyal soldiers of the Princess Guard... It seemed unnecessarily cruel to remind the poor girl that Elise herself might follow in their footsteps, so she kept the thought to herself.

*Still, one of these days, I have to tell her. She has to...be ready. The enemy is close. Too close...*

“Which part are you writing about now?” asked Miabel, getting on her tippy toes to rest her chin on the desk and examine the words on the page.

Elise gently stroked her head, smiling at her endearing behavior.

“Right now, I’m writing about the summer she went to a deserted

island."

The gesture would have been unthinkable during normal times. Miabel was of imperial blood. She was to be served and revered. The regal sphere of her head was definitely not something a commoner like Elise should dare to intrude upon with her hand. But these weren't normal times, and Elise did so both frequently and without hesitation. Mostly, it was to give Miabel a loving pat, but sometimes, it was to hold her in place for a scolding. Elise didn't enjoy the latter, but she did it anyway. That had been the arrangement, originally established by Mia's loyal subjects, Ludwig and Anne.

*"Miss Bel has lost so much. First, her mother. Then the rest of her family. Everyone who should be giving her the love that she needs is gone...and that's just too much for a child..."*

Their voices echoed in her head as she affectionately ran her hand through the girl's hair. She always treated Miabel with respect, but she made sure to temper it with occasional admonishment. That had been their compromise—to afford Miabel not a servant's deference but the honest love of a parent. Elise followed their example. She was well aware that she had to be more than a simple retainer to Miabel, for blind loyalty could never replace what she'd lost. Furthermore, she knew that Mia Luna Tearmoon—the Great Sage of the Empire she'd loved so dearly—had not been one to be bound by the rules of polite society. It was clear how Mia would have wanted her granddaughter to be raised. Anne knew it, Ludwig knew it, and Elise knew it too. What Miabel needed was every last drop of Elise's honest, unconditional love.

Which she gave willingly.

"Apparently, Mia was caught in a storm, and she was stuck spending a few days on this island. One night, her friend Lady Esmeralda Etoile Greenmoon disappeared, so..."

Her eyes scrunched into narrow crescents of pleasure, Bel enjoyed the sensation of Elise's hand running gently along her head while she waited for Anne to bring hot milk. This was a precious time—a profound moment of happiness that she would come to treasure above all else.

# Chapter 1: To Be or Not To Be...

"Esmeralda is...gone?"

Nina's only response was to nod. She could offer no other details. Apparently, everyone had gone out to search as best they could, but Esmeralda was nowhere to be found.

"Hm..."

Faced with this mystery, the mind of Great Detective Mia instantly logicked out a few possible explanations:

(1) The events of the day left Esmeralda feeling like the odd one out, so she threw a hissy fit and ran away from home. Cave. Whatever.

(2) She couldn't resist the Call To Adventure™ and decided to explore the mysterious island.

(3) She got hungry and went looking for something tasty to eat.

*Frankly, all three are equally likely... Or maybe it's because of some even stupider reason that defies all logic...*

Mia shook her head and sighed.

"Ugh, I swear, that girl..."

"She might have gone to the spring by herself. Perhaps for a morning bath, or for a drink of water..." suggested a nervous Nina.

Mia nodded.

"Hm, good point... She does seem like the kind of person who'd claim that a glass of ice cold spring water, fresh from the source, is the only way to start the day... Let's hurry and go take a look around the spring then."

"Hold on." Sion put up an arresting hand. "There's no point in all of us going together. Keithwood, could you head down to the beach? Keep your eyes on the sea and cover as much of the shoreline as you can."

"You're thinking she might have gone to see if the Emerald Star is back, I presume? Got it."

"That and pirates. In the unlikely event that they have a ship somewhere

around here, she might have mistaken it for the Emerald Star and gotten herself kidnapped."

Sion's comment jogged Mia's memory.

*That reminds me... They mentioned that this cave might be man-made.*

In that case, it was entirely possible that pirates had been using it as a hideout.

"Unless she's intentionally refusing to come back, we should assume that she's being held against her will. By people who either were already here or are newly arrived by sea. It doesn't seem too likely at the moment, but we should be on guard just in case. Better safe than sorry. Nina, I'd like you to come with me. As for you, Abel..."

"I'm joining the search party too, of course," Mia declared. "I'll go the other way, the one opposite the spring, and search that side."

As the resident survival expert—self-appointed, obviously—this was her time to shine. She turned to Anne.

"Anne, I'm sorry, but I'm going to have to ask you to stay here. If Esmeralda comes back, make sure you keep her from running off again."

"Understood. I'll do what I can to prepare food for everyone as well."

Fortunately, they still had some greens left from Mia's foraging trip. She'd hauled back a small mountain, having given no thought to portions or practicality, but it was a boon for them now. More importantly, they'd all received the Keithwood Seal of Edibleness.

"In that case, you'll want to remove the nodes on those stems just like we did yesterday, and..."

While Nina was giving Anne a quick refresher, Keithwood headed out.

"Miss Anne, I'm sorry that we'll be leaving you here by yourself. If anyone strange shows up, just hide. Don't confront them," advised Sion.

With this, he and Nina departed as well, and after them the last pair—Mia and Abel—prepared to leave as well.

"All right, time for me to go too, Anne."

"Please be careful out there, milady."

After exchanging a quick farewell, Mia followed Abel out of the cavern. Walking in the opposite direction from the spring, they were headed for the place she'd previously explored with Keithwood. They soon entered the forest, following small winding trails left by animals that wove through the branches. Protruding tree roots made for an uneven path, which was made

worse by the water-logged soil. On multiple occasions Mia almost lost her balance, but she managed to stay upright and plodded on.

"It looks like it rained again during the night. Watch your step, Mia."

He extended a hand to her, which she promptly grasped with a smile.

"Always the gentleman. Thank you, Abel."

"I-It's nothing. Th-The ground's pretty muddy. I don't want you to slip, that's all," he said, his eyes drifting in every direction except hers. "There sure has been a lot of rain this year, hasn't there?"

As she watched him take a sudden interest in the sky, she remembered that there was something important she had to tell him. Well, "remembered" might not be the right word, since she'd never really forgotten. She'd simply put it off. Lately though, it had frequently occupied her thoughts.

She'd been wondering whether she should tell Abel about her knowledge of the future. What would he think of her if she confided in him the truth of her foresight? His trust, especially, was extremely important. She had to make him believe her so he could prepare for what was coming. However she went about it, there was no room for error. The stakes were high, and her stomach filled with butterflies every time she considered attempting it. As a result, she'd never been able to broach the topic. Time, however, was running out. She made up her mind.

"There certainly is. By the way, Abel, there's something I'd like to tell you. I already spoke to Keithwood about it, but I think you should know too. Very soon, there's going to be a serious famine," she said, purposefully choosing a mild, matter-of-fact delivery.

She honestly couldn't care less about what might happen to Sunkland, but Remno worried her. The recent incident with the revolution was certainly cause for personal concern, but it was also Abel's homeland. If possible, she'd like to see the kingdom remain peaceful. So she adopted a dispassionate tone, hoping to minimize the shock of her words by speaking them as if they were well-established facts.

At first, Abel looked at her with surprise.

"Seriously? Are you sure about that?"

"Of course. I can't show you any definitive proof, but—"

Before she could explain further, Abel said with a gentle smile, "Never mind. If you say it is so, then it is. I believe you."

And that was that. He trusted her so easily that *she* ended up looking like

the one who had just been hit with a bombshell revelation.

"You— What? Huh? You believe me?"

"Yes. Once we manage to get off this island, I'll go talk to some people I trust. I'll mention it to my father too. He might not believe me, but given how this summer is turning out, some people will."

"Ah. Well, that's good, but... Um, why?"

He shrugged helplessly as she stared at him in disbelief.

"You have no reason to deceive me. Besides, even if the famine doesn't happen, it's still you saying it will. Whatever happens, even if it's just out of honest concern, I trust your motives."

"I... But... Uh..."

His earnest eyes robbed her of words. There was no logic to his trust. He hadn't reasoned his way to believing her. He simply did, because it was her. She was delighted. And touched. And a dozen other things. They were so overwhelming that her brain simply gave up on expressing any of them, leaving her with only a blank stare.

"Anyway, let's keep moving."

He pulled her ahead, their hands still clasped. His reddened ears suggested the vulnerable nature of his words had caught up with him too. The realization allowed Mia to retrieve some semblance of her composure.

*M-Moons! I can't believe him! He's just...so* direct *sometimes! It's too much! But he's so dreamy when he's like that...*

Mia was having another one of her moments, in which her mind was filled with flowers and rainbows and smiling Abels. She spent the rest of the walk savoring her inner delight, stopping only when the underbrush abruptly gave way to the rocky ground she'd seen yesterday. Patches of brown earth could be glimpsed through the countless cracks that ran along the craggy surface, and the area seemed very difficult to walk across.

"She...couldn't possibly have gone past here, could she?" asked Abel as he regarded the unfriendly terrain.

"You're right. It looks very dangerous, and she'd probably have no reason to do so. It'd be a waste of her time and energy...which is exactly why she'd march across this rocky mess! Because she's Esmeralda!"

In Mia's eyes, Esmeralda was the kind of person who, if given instructions by a superior—her parents, for example—would obey them religiously, but if told something by someone she deemed equal or, god

forbid, below her, she'd be overcome by an irresistible urge to do the exact opposite. Put simply, she was a real handful.

*I swear, that girl has the most annoying personality...*

It bears mentioning that Mia also had a tendency to reach for mushrooms that she was explicitly told to keep her hands away from, but alas, people's flaws are often apparent to everyone except themselves. Mia and Esmeralda were, in fact, quite similar.

"I should have warned her myself last night... Maybe letting Keithwood do it was a mistake."

She'd figured Esmeralda would be more accepting of advice if it came from a handsome young man. Clearly, she'd been wrong.

"Anyway, let's keep going. I don't know what it's like up ahead though, so be careful."

She led the way, taking a step onto the rocky terrain. With almost comedic immediacy, she felt something shift underfoot. There was a loud, crumbling noise, and she looked down just in time to see the earth open up like a gaping maw.

"...Eh?"

That was all she could utter before the void swallowed her whole.

*Ah, feeling of weightlessness, I've missed you,* she thought in a moment of crisis-induced pre-panic composure. *We really need to get together more often. When was the last time we saw each other? The river, I think? Right, tha— Wait, if I'm falling right now...and it's* not *a river down there...aren't I dead?*

"Mia!"

She heard Abel's frantic shout. An instant later, a pair of arms wrapped themselves around her and pulled her into a tight embrace.

"Eeek! A-Abel?!" she yelped, realizing that Abel had thrown himself into the hole to protect her. With her face pressed against his chest, she closed her eyes and thought, *Well, out of all the possible situations that result in my death, this is a pretty decent one to be in!*

Not the most productive thought.

*Hmm... To be or not to be, that is the question...*

She pondered the pseudo-philosophical topic, gauging whether 'tis nobler in the mind to suffer the slings and arrows of an outrageously painful but still fortunate landing, or to take arms—such strong, *manly* arms—

against a sea of troubles, and by opposing them further across her body, end them.

All the while, she just kept on falling.

# Chapter 2: Anne's Resolve

"That takes care of that, and then..." Anne looked around. Her shoulders fell, and she let out a deep sigh. "I...guess I'm done."

Having finished preparing the last of the greens according to Nina's instructions, she no longer had any more work to do. She'd never imagined she'd be left alone on an uninhabited island. Wholly unprepared for this scenario, she had no idea what she was supposed to do now.

"I wish milady was here. That way I could at least keep busy. There's so much I could do for her..."

Their current environment was a harsh one, and she desperately wished she could perform some preemptive care routines to shield Mia's hair and skin from the elements. In fact, it had taken all of her restraint to keep from fussing over them constantly. When it came to maintaining Mia's beauty, Anne spared no hassle.

"I do wonder, though... Where in the world did Lady Esmeralda go?"

Personally, she wasn't particularly fond of Esmeralda, but she certainly wished no harm on her either. Malice just wasn't in Anne's nature, and she honestly hoped that they'd find her safe and sound—all the more so because even Mia, despite her frequent grumbling, still treated Esmeralda as a friend. The girl's whereabouts were, therefore, a cause of concern for her.

"...Could she really have just wandered into the forest?"

But there was one question that Anne had been mulling over ever since they'd discovered that Esmeralda was gone.

"I mean, it's Lady Esmeralda... *Could* she even have left this cave on her own?"

Everyone had just assumed offhand that she'd gone out of the cave.

"She didn't really seem like the type to be brave enough to wander around in a forest by herself..." she murmured pensively.

Recklessness and boldness went hand in hand. After all, a certain amount of courage was needed before one could engage in a rash act. Even

if Esmeralda had thrown a tantrum and stormed out, would she have headed into the forest? Alone? At night? Did she really have the guts?

"If it was milady, maybe...but *her*? I just can't see her doing something like that."

Mia could be a bit of a chicken sometimes, but when push came to shove, she definitely had the courage to step forward into darkness, no matter how scary it seemed. Or so Anne believed, anyway. The truth was another matter. What she *didn't* believe, however, was in Esmeralda's ability to do the same, which necessarily led to one conclusion...

If she was nowhere to be found, but she hadn't left the cave, then...

"She must still be in here somewhere..."

The first thought that came to Anne was that Esmeralda was hiding, secretly watching everyone lose their heads over her disappearance and having a jolly ol' time. It fit the image of the stuck-up noble girl so well, in fact, that Anne was almost sure she was right and felt a wave of honest irritation roll through her. A thorough search of the premises, however, revealed no snickering Esmeraldas.

"She really isn't here then..."

She looked again for good measure, examining every nook and cranny near the entrance, but to no avail. It wasn't a difficult search either. While the cave opened up a little past the initial opening, there were few places that could hide a person. Figuring Esmeralda must have gone outside, she was just about to give up when another thought occurred to her.

"Could she...have gone *deeper* into the cave? And gotten stuck there?"

Things began to fit together in her mind as if she'd happened upon a missing piece of a puzzle. Instead of venturing outside into the darkness of the forest, wandering further into the cavern where everyone slept seemed more plausible. The latter was technically still the same place, offering a sense of security.

"She was told not to go any deeper in...but wanting to do the opposite of what you're told is apparently a thing for high-ranking nobles..."

Anne was well aware that there were people of principle and integrity among the aristocracy, but the term "nobility" nevertheless conjured up images of brazenly conceited lords and ladies who paid no heed to the advice of others. Deciding to explore the cavern's depths by herself in a fit of haughty indignation sounded exactly like the kind of foolhardy thing

someone like Esmeralda would do.

"Either way, Mia and the others are already looking for her outside..."

Waiting here alone was by no means a pointless task, but it felt so...passive. Driven by a desire to be useful—to do something, *anything*, but sit around and wait while everyone else was out scouring the island—she squared her shoulders and stared at the entrance for a few seconds before finally whispering, "I can't be twiddling my thumbs while they're all out there looking for her."

Resolve hardened within, and she launched into action. As a precaution, she scratched a message into the soil in case Esmeralda actually made her way back here. It would also let Mia and the others know where she was when they returned.

"Also, I'll need a light source if I'm going deeper into the cave..."

She quickly trekked down to the beach where they'd set up the smoke signals and took the remainder of the thick branches that had been used to perch the cooking pot above the fire. Using a length of ivy she found in the forest, she tied a couple of them together into a bundle, then stuffed dry leaves and thinner twigs with more resin into one end. The ivy had been too thick to use as a fishing line, but it came in handy for keeping bundles of wood together. Soon, she had herself a makeshift torch.

"Now, all I have to do is light it..."

She hadn't expected much, figuring it'd be fine as long as it produced some light, but her improvised creation turned out well, burning with a strong, steady flame. With the torch in hand, she returned to the cave. As she stepped into its deeper recesses, however, its glow suddenly seemed a lot weaker and less reassuring than before. The wavering light from the meager flame was all but swallowed up by the overwhelming darkness. Her grip tightened around her torch, but she pressed forward.

"She's milady's friend..." she reminded herself. "I have to look for her..."

The inside of the cavern was winding and uneven, filled with twists and turns and slopes of all sizes. There were passages so small she had to crawl to get through. There were also spaces so large she couldn't touch the ceiling even if she jumped. Eventually, she came to an area with stalactites hanging down like icicles. The path forward narrowed, and she couldn't tell

where it led.

“It looks like it’s downhill though... If I go down there, I probably won’t be able to get back up...”

Before her was a steep incline descending into the bowels of the earth. Looking down, she found nothing but darkness. Figuring this was as far as she could go, she turned back. And then immediately spun back around, her eyes having caught a glimpse of something strange during the initial turn. There, near the top of the incline, hanging just close enough to reach if she stretched out her arm, was half a stalactite, its exposed cross-section suggesting the lower end had broken off.

“This...”

She leaned forward a little and examined the broken end. There were plenty of similar rock formations nearby, but only this one had lost its tip. The missing fragment was nowhere to be seen on the ground.

“This looks like it was in the perfect spot to hold on to... If someone grabbed it and tried to...”

She imagined herself leaning forward further to peer down the slope.

“Oh no... If she fell from here... I need to let everyone know.”

Just as she was about to turn back, there was a deafening crack, followed by the sound of tumbling rocks.

“Waaaaaah!”

She screamed and squatted down, bracing as she threw her hands over her head. No impact came. After a few seconds of silence, she gingerly looked up, shielding her nose and mouth from the dust with her sleeve. As she picked up her torch and raised it again, she found that the path she’d taken to come here was now blocked by a wall of rock.

“Oh no...”

She gulped. A flurry of thoughts sped through her mind. She was stuck here. She might never get out. She could die here. She would never see her family again. But one thought stood out more than all the others.

*Milady... I won’t be able to serve her anymore... She’s done so much for me, and I haven’t even* begun *to repay her...*

Her vision blurred with tears.

“Milady... Mia...”

The words left her as a pleading whisper.

“Mia...”

She spoke her mistress's name like a prayer. Then, she stopped, closed her eyes, and drew in a deep, trembling breath.

"I need to calm down... I'm Princess Mia's personal maid."

Mia had said that she was her right hand and confidant. If she had even the slightest intention of living up to that claim, she couldn't afford to give up so easily. Mia's right hand wouldn't sit here and cry to herself. It would stain the name of the Great Sage of the Empire.

"And more importantly...it would be an insult to all of Mia's hard work."

She brandished her torch again, pointing it forward. Its light shone not upon the solid footing of the tunnel behind her, but down the slope into the waiting darkness.

"I've come all this way... I might as well keep going."

It was too early to give up and cry. She'd have plenty of time to do that at the end, when her life was flashing before her eyes.

"Wait for me, milady... I'll find my way back..."

With that quiet whisper of resolve, she began sliding down the slope.

Little did Anne know, the cause of the cave-in was none other than her dear mistress.

# Chapter 3: The Last Friend

Now, for a change of pace, let us go back to Saint-Noel Academy.

While Grandmother Mia, Mother Anne, and even Mr. Ludwig were off fighting their own valiant battles, what do you think Miabel was up to?

"Aaah... It's just as I thought. This is a dream. It has to be. I'm so happy here that it's actually a little scary..."

She was having the time of her life. *Carpe*-ing the heck out of that *diem*, so to speak. How much *diem* was she *carpe*-ing, you ask? Well, about a sweet morning pancake and a nightly cup of hot chocolate's worth each day, every day. Plus all the stuff in between. Of course, since school life consisted of more than just pancakes and hot chocolate, and she possessed a smidge more diligence than Mia, she got a good amount of exercise in every day as well going for long walks through the beautiful campus, short runs along the lakeshore, and even jumping in for a swim from time to time. It was, in fact, the ideal example of a healthy, balanced student lifestyle.

Granted, this was all because she'd been forced to stay at school during the summer break, and that was itself the result of her dismal academic performance, making her somewhat less suitable as a model of exemplary student behavior. But with Lynsha keeping a close eye on her, she was kept from descending into abject unproductivity. After all, "being able to do a pretty decent job so long as they tried hard" was a defining feature of Mia's bloodline. While their steps tended to be slow and of occasionally dubious directionality, they nevertheless maintained a steady pace forward.

And that was why today, like she had all the other days, Bel went to the library. With the summer break in full swing, it was almost empty inside. The only ones present were Bel, Lynsha, and the librarian. After plopping herself down on her favorite windowside seat, Bel pushed her arms high into the air and stretched before deflating onto the desk like a leaking balloon. With eyes closed, her breathing promptly began slipping into the slow rhythm of slumber.

"Milady... I thought you came here to study."

Lynsha, sitting across from her mistress, was not particularly amused. She eyed Bel admonishingly as she picked up one of the books she'd brought for herself. While Bel was studying, Lynsha had intended to do some studying of her own. She was quite eager to, in fact. Her brother being the way he was, *somebody* in her family had to pick up the respectability slack.

"Aha ha, I was just playing around, Miss Lynsha. You don't have to stare at me like that. It's sort of scary." Bel smiled and waved her hands dismissively. Lynsha didn't bite.

"You're going to finish all your homework today before leaving, got it? And don't try to run away. I've got my eyes on you."

With a groan, Bel flattened herself onto the desk again. She peeked through drooping eyelids at the small mountain of homework.

"Aaah... I'm...so happy here..."

A small but genuine smile spread across her lips.

After about an hour of honest studying, Bel began wandering through the library. They'd agreed that once she finished all her work, she could spend the rest of the time reading. Having been raised by an author, being around books made Bel feel at home. For most of her life, she'd known only a world of rampant book burning, so the sheer wealth of volumes in Saint-Noel's library was a breathtaking sight to behold. Walking amongst its stacks, she felt like she was in heaven.

"So many choices... I wonder what I should read today? I really like illustrated books about animals. Maybe I'll read one of those. Oh, but the ones with pictures of cute-looking plants are good too..."

"Hey, you. Would you happen to be that girl who's close to Princess Mia?"

A voice called out to her as she was looking through the book spines on a shelf. Puzzled, she turned around to find a girl staring at her with intent interest. The girl was about her age. She had soft, wavy hair that glowed gold and beautiful gray eyes that made her look like a doll. With a sweet, flowerlike smile, she waited for Bel to answer.

"Um... Yes, I think?" Bel answered with a curious tilt of her head. "Grand— I mean, Miss Mia is someone I look up to and respect a lot."

"Hm? What was that? Grand?"

Frowning, the girl put a finger to her chin and tilted her head. Her hair fluttered with the motion, releasing a floral fragrance that quickly reached Bel's nose. It smelled really good, so good that Bel started to feel her mind going blank.

"Oh well. Whatever. Recently, you're always here in the library studying. Aren't you going home for the summer?"

"Mm hm. It's a little embarrassing to admit, but my grades on the exam before the break were bad, so I have to stay..."

"Huh. Really. You actually care about all that?" The girl snickered. "It doesn't actually matter, you know. But whatever floats your boat."

Bel scratched her head, puzzled by this response.

"Anyway, would you like to be Rina's friend?" she asked with a cute smile and big, round eyes.

"Who?"

"Hm? Oh, I mean me. It's my name. I'm Rina."

She took a step back, held her skirt, and performed a curtsy. Bel caught a brief but striking glimpse of the skin on her legs in the process. It was startlingly white. Dreadfully, even. Almost sickly.

"Citrina Etoile Yellowmoon. Nice to make your acquaintance. I'm a first year student like you, Miabel." She smiled that sweet smile again. "All my best friends call me Rina though, so I'd love it if you called me Rina too."

"I see. Okay, Rina. In that case, you can call me Bel."

Bel returned the curtsy in kind.

"Tee hee, wonderful. Please be kind to Rina, okay, Bel?" she chirped.

The thing that stood out to Bel the most about the girl was her smile. She really did have such a sweet smile.

# Chapter 4: Princess Mia...Reaches a Peak! (In Her Opinion)

Amidst a mass of rocky debris, Mia kept falling, cradled in Abel's arms and enraptured by his warmth.

*Aaah... I'm going to die...of happiness overload...*

Severe blunt trauma was a likelier suspect, but in any case, her fanciful cause-of-death analysis was cut short by the sudden sensation of water being poured over her head.

*Splash!*

Rather, the event would be better described as her plunging into that water headfirst. She tried to scream, only for water to fill her mouth. She managed only a few panicked *blubs* and was starting to thrash when a tightening of Abel's arms stilled her. She calmed and gave herself over to him.

*I'll just let Abel handle this. We'll be okay...*

Love and trust swirled together into a narcotic-like mix of sentiments that relaxed her mind and muscles. She let herself go limp, offering no resistance as he pulled her with him. A few seconds later...

"Bwaaah!"

Feeling her face break the water's surface, she opened her mouth and drew in a lungful of air.

"Augh! Wh-What is this? Ow ow ow! M-My eyes... It stings! And my mouth tastes salty... This is...sea water?"

She rubbed vigorously at her eyes with one hand as she looked up at Abel. His head was turned upward, and he wore a deep frown. She followed his gaze to discover a rocky ceiling. A very *high* rocky ceiling. The opening they'd fallen through looked tiny from where she now stood.

"W-Wow... We fell from all the way up there? It's a good thing there's water down here. I don't think we would have made it otherwise."

"Yeah, we were lucky. Still, the water's too cold for us to stay in. Let's

get out and dry off," he said, pointing toward one wall of the cavern where the ground rose up out of the water, forming a bank. "Can you swim?"

"Mm hm hm, of course I can. I've been practicing. Watch and be amazed."

She promptly demonstrated what she felt was the ultimate swimming style—one that put all others to shame—by spinning around and...falling into a back float. This, she'd decided, was truly the best way to swim. There was no need to hold her breath. Her face wouldn't even get wet. The only thing she needed to do was to go limp and float like a log. The sheer lack of effort required was what pleased her most. After a brief moment of stillness, she began kicking her legs, their tiny paddling spatters creating a modicum of forward momentum.

"Oh, let me know if I'm about to bump into something, okay?"

"Sure, I'll let you know when we're getting close. Let's go."

Abel dove forward as well, and the two of them began swimming for dry land.

After climbing out of the water, Mia let out a breath of relief.

"Are you hurt anywhere?"

"No, I think I'm fine. Thanks to you, of course. Are you?"

"I'm fine too. This water saved our lives."

Mia nodded, her mind now composed enough to fully appreciate their good fortune. Her gaze moved across the water's surface to an adjacent rock face and followed it upward. It was tall, reaching about three floors up if it had been the wall of a castle. A thin cone of sunlight shone down from the crack in the ceiling, suggesting they hadn't been shut in. Nonetheless...

"That...doesn't look climbable," she muttered.

The surface of the rock face was smooth and slippery. Scaling it was beyond the capabilities of the average human.

*I can see Dion climbing this and making it look easy. But he doesn't count. That man's barely human, never mind average.*

At the very least, it was beyond *her* capabilities. That meant that while the water had prevented their immediate death, their chances of escaping this predicament alive *or* dead were not entirely optimistic.

"I'm sorry, Abel. I dragged you into a terrible mess."

Her shoulders fell in a rare display of ruefulness. Abel, however, shook

his head.

“Don’t be. I’m actually glad I’m here.”

“Hm? Whatever do you mean?”

“If someone dear to you is in danger, you want to be with them. To protect them. I can’t stand the thought of you being down here without me.”

“My...”

Mia pressed her hand to her mouth and regarded him with widened eyes. He shuffled his feet a little and turned away, not meeting her gaze. Instead he just blushed.

*Oh, Abel,* thought Mia with amusement, *why do you keep saying things like that if it embarrasses you so much?*

Her cheeks had grown warm as well, but being a mature woman in her twenties, she managed to refrain from any outward displays of awkwardness. He’d caught her off guard at first, but she’d quickly regained her composure. Mia had, in fact, already grasped the quirks of Abel’s personality. He was frank and earnest, which often led him to speak his mind. This knowledge allowed her to maintain a certain degree of mental preparation, which softened the impact of his sudden assaults on her heart.

Big Sister Mia still had the upper hand!

Upper hand or not though, she still wasn’t immune to the inherent awkwardness of the situation, and allowing silence to fall seemed like a great way to make things even more awkward. So, she spoke up.

“Anyway, we do seem to be in a pinch, don’t we? We can either wait for help to arrive, or wait to see if the situation changes... Either way, it’s probably a good idea to stay put for— Ah-choo!”

She sneezed, then shuddered. It was colder than she’d realized, evidenced by the goosebumps on her skin.

“Mia? Are you okay?”

“Y-Yes, I’m quite fine. I’m just wet, so it’s a little cold.”

Slightly embarrassed by the sneeze, she tried to brush it off with a nonchalant smile, but Abel’s expression remained grave.

“I see. If you stay cold, it’s going to rob you of your stamina...” He briefly hesitated before saying, “Sorry, Mia.”

“Eh? Sorry? For wha—”

He robbed her of her voice instead. Confused and flustered, she froze in his embrace.

*Eh? What? Huh?*

Her inner big sister suffered a decisive KO, leaving her to flounder on her own. She began to grow light-headed as Abel's soft voice entered her ear.

"I'm sorry. I know this is inappropriate...but we need to use our body heat to stay warm right now."

Despite his apology, his tone was firm, and he pulled her closer.

*Ah, I see what's going on here... Even if I resist, he won't let me go because he's decided it's necessary... That's why he keeps holding me tighter and tighter... So I can't get away...*

She fled to the logical side of her mind, analyzing the situation at arm's length to avoid losing her cool. It didn't work for long, as his comforting warmth seeped through her body and permeated her mind. His embrace, so tight as to hurt a little, bespoke a naive clumsiness. All was silent save for his breathing and hers. She made an effort to exhale smoothly so that a puff of unsteady air hitting his ear would not give away her inner agitation. Meanwhile, her traitorous heart pounded ever louder and faster. As fever engulfed her mind, she engaged what faculties remained functional in a desperate attempt to think clearly.

*I-Is this real? Maybe I did die after all. This must be that heaven place they talk about! That has to be it! There's no explaining it otherwise! How else can such a dreamy situation possibly be happening?!*

The life that began at the guillotine had now reached its indisputable peak!

Well, that's what Mia thought at least.

# Chapter 5: Follow the Glowing Blue Path

The sharing of personal space did warm Mia up, though maybe entirely not in the way Abel had intended. Heat coursed through her flushed face, washing away all sense of the cold. She forgot all about the fact that she'd been shuddering mere moments before and began entertaining thoughts such as *If it's only the two of us, maybe we can just live here. It wouldn't be so bad. After all, my palace and paradise lies in his arms!* For now, productive thinking was simply beyond her.

"Mia, look."

"...Eh?"

Unsure of his intended direction, she looked up at him. It seemed as good a choice as any. Then, after a brief moment of appreciating his fine features, she followed his gaze.

"Over there. The water seems to be receding."

She could see it too. The water level had fallen, exposing more of the bank. A little lower and they might be able to walk through it.

"But..."

She looked somberly up at the opening in the ceiling. The light leaking through had definitely grown dimmer. Night was falling.

"The water's finally low enough for us to try to get out of here, but moving around in the dark will be a little dangerous."

The existence of tides suggested there was an exit out to sea. Swimming through the sea in the darkness of night was not something Mia felt like attempting.

"Hm... You're right of course, but..." Abel crossed his arms in thought. "We're not going to get anywhere just by waiting. The longer we're here, the worse off we'll be. The situation is changing. Let's keep a close eye on things so we don't miss an opportunity to escape."

Abel's comment proved prophetic. Just as the last rays of light were

fading from the ceiling, he let out a whoop of excitement.

"Look, Mia! There! The water!"

"My! What...*is* this?"

She stared in astonishment. The surface of the water was much lower than before, but more importantly, it now glowed with a soft blue light. The faint gleam was no torch or lantern, but it was bright enough to make their immediate surroundings visible, and it continued deep into the cavern in a ghostly path. Thanks to this light, it was arguably easier to move around now than it had been during the day.

"This is our chance. We can't afford to waste it. We'll only get weaker if we stay here," urged Abel.

Mia took a moment to think. When lost or waiting for rescue, the theoretically correct approach was to stay put and conserve stamina. The problem was that considering the group of people they'd come to the island with, it was going to be very difficult for the other members to attempt a rescue. Most of all, *she* was the group's survival expert. What chance did they have if she didn't take action to get back to them?

Feeling emboldened by this self-induced reminder of her talents, she nodded.

"All right. Let's go then."

She took his outstretched hand.

Led by Abel's hand, Mia followed the path of blue light. The area where they'd landed had numerous openings in the walls, but the glowing road led in only two directions. In one, the water grew deeper, and the other, shallower. Swimming in the cold of night was suicidal, so they naturally headed in the shallow direction.

"The ground here's uneven. Be careful. Here, hold my arm."

Time and again, Abel stopped and turned around to check on her, offering words of concern and encouragement. It made her giggle.

"You're such a gentleman, Abel."

Even under these dire circumstances, he slowed his walking to keep pace with her. Not only that, he kept her hand in his, his grip shifting from tender to firm in accordance with his assessment of their surroundings. It was almost as if he were leading her through an intricate dance, and she couldn't help but smile.

“It’s something my older sister used to say. She told me to always be kind to girls, no matter the circumstances.”

“Oh? Your older sister? You mean...”

In the previous timeline, Mia hadn’t paid much attention to the Kingdom of Remno or its royal family. Abel was pretty much the only one she’d known about. Understandable, considering she’d spent all her time waiting for Sion to approach her. This time around, Mia was different, and she’d done her homework. Why? Because she’d already decided that Abel was her groom of choice. Having set her sights on him, Mia, with her newfound romance smarts, had made sure to do plenty of legwork beforehand.

“Princess Clarissa? Isn’t that her name?”

She recalled that Abel had a sister three years older than him who, according to Mia’s research, was a reserved, introverted girl of few words.

*Doesn’t seem like the person to give him that kind of advice...*

Her puzzled frown was answered by a shake of his head.

“Yes, that’s her name, but it wasn’t her. The sister who said that to me was my *oldest* sister.”

“Your oldest sister? My, I didn’t know you had another sister...”

“I’d be surprised if you did. She passed away. Five years ago...” His expression, already blue from the ghostly glow, grew a little bluer. “I loved her...a great deal. She was...very kind. But more than that, she was strong. There was this aura to her, and it was dazzling. I looked up to her. She said that the way everyone thought in Remno was wrong, so she wanted me, at least, not to be like them. To be kind to girls...”

Within the Kingdom of Remno and its deeply entrenched misogyny, there had once been a powerful person who questioned its discriminatory status quo.

“I’m not proud to admit that for a long time, I’d forgotten... Forgotten why I tried to be kind to women... I’d thought it was just a quirk. That I’d been doing it on a whim. But it wasn’t. It was her. Her words have been in me all this time, guiding me like a compass.”

*I never knew Abel lost someone who’d had such a profound effect on his life... I wish I could have met her...*

Growing pensive, she asked, “This sister of yours... What was her name?”

“Valentina Remno. The first princess of our kingdom.”

“I see. Lady Valentina...”

It would be some time before Mia would recover her memories of the woman who’d borne that name.

# Chapter 6: Anne...Discourses About (Her Version of) The Great Sage of the Empire

Darkness filled the cavern, its suffocating silence broken only by a mousy sniffling sound.

“Oh, woe is me... Am I going to die here?”

With her faintly glowing pendant cupped in her hands, Esmeralda sniveled helplessly as she sat leaning against a rock with her legs stretched out in front of her. She made a weak attempt to lift her right foot, but the pain that followed made her give up and she let it fall limp again.

“Ooooh, it hurts... It hurts so much...” She sniveled some more. “The bone must be broken. It has to be. I’m stuck here forever now... I’m going to starve and die. Oooooh...”

Miserable and in pain, Esmeralda was even more annoying to be around than she usually was. Right now, she was *two* handfuls. Her vision swimming with tears, she looked forlornly into the vast void that stretched out before her...and gasped at the appearance of a faint red light.

“Wha—?!”

She managed to stifle her scream but failed to rein in her imagination. Her mind forcibly reminded her about her own spooky story, in which the ghosts of evil cultists roamed the deserted island. It made her shiver, but she soon regained her composure, deciding that such nonsense couldn’t possibly be true. Moreover, the red light was coming from the direction of the cave entrance, which could only mean...

“Nina?! Is that you? Did you come to rescue me?”

As the approaching figure neared, she could make out a maid’s uniform, making her more certain of her deduction.

“Oh good. I knew it. I can’t possibly die in a place like this. That just wouldn’t be right. Clearly, Ni— I mean, my maid is coming to rescue me.”

She waited as the light-bearing figure came closer and closer, until...

“Oh! Lady Esmeralda, are you okay?”

The maid revealed herself to have red hair that fell down either side of her body in two tails. It was Anne.

“Huh, Ann— Ahem. It’s you. Miss Mia’s maid.”

Esmeralda was a little disappointed to find that it wasn’t Nina, but only a little. The relief of knowing that help had arrived was so profound she was practically beaming. The thrill drove her to her feet. A split second later, she yelped as pain shot up her leg.

“Lady Esmeralda? Are you hurt?”

“Ow, um, yes. I seem to have hurt my ankle when I fell down the slope there. I think the bone must be broken.”

“Oh no! That’s terrible! Quickly, please sit down! And stretch out your legs.”

“Hmph, seeing as you’re Miss Mia’s maid, I suppose I can do this one favor for you. Be grateful. For this time, and this time only, I shall obey your instruction.”

Despite her haughty tone, she was seated before she finished speaking. With her legs outstretched, she watched as Anne crouched down beside her injured foot.

“Oh? Are you versed in wound care? I’m mildly impressed.”

“My younger brother suffered a fracture once.”

“Oh my, then you’re barely more than an amateur. I suppose I was being foolish. Clearly, one can never expect too much from a commoner.”

Even as she faulted Anne for her lack of extensive medical know-how, her relief continued to grow; a bit of experience was better than none. Comforted by the thought, her pain seemed to recede a little.

“Does it hurt a lot?”

“It certainly does. It hurts so much I can’t even stand. I’m telling you, it’s broken. It must be.”

“Hm... Let me have a look. Excuse me.”

Anne placed her hand on Esmeralda’s ankle and felt around. Then she ripped a length of cloth from the hem of her skirt and began wrapping it around the ankle for immobilization.

“H-How is it?” asked an anxious Esmeralda. “I-It’s broken, isn’t it?”

“No, the bone doesn’t seem to be broken. The area is bruised though... It’s best to avoid moving your ankle.”

Esmeralda’s distress lessened with every answer. The pain faded even

more. She felt so good that she was pretty sure she could already get up and walk on her own. She was, at heart, not a complicated girl.

"By the way, how come you came all the way here by yourself? Keithwood told us it's dangerous to go deeper into the cave. Why didn't you listen?" asked Anne.

"Are you trying to tell me off? You? A commoner?" Esmeralda made an indignant sound. "You know, you'd better not be letting this whole 'Miss Mia's maid' thing get to your head."

She added a hint of irritation to her tone. Normally, that was enough to silence Nina and the other maids. It failed to work on Anne, for whom it functioned more like oil on fire.

"All right, listen here, you," said Anne with the tone of someone who'd *had enough*. "Let me make one thing clear. What happens to you is none of my concern. Go roll down as many slopes as you want. I literally could not care less. But could you kindly do it in a way that won't cause trouble for milady? She cares about you. Even now, she's probably worried sick about you. If you go pull some stupid stunt and something happens to you, it would break her heart... Honestly, are you *that* dense? Do you have any idea how much trouble you've caused?"

Anne's outburst left Esmeralda stunned. After a brief moment, she swallowed and blinked a few times. As her wits returned, she felt a wave of hot rage course through her head.

"Huh?! You—" Esmeralda exclaimed, bristling. "You think you can talk to me like that and get away with it? Oh, I won't forget this! I'll tell Miss Mia about your insolence! I'll tell His Majesty! They'll—"

"You can tell whoever you want *after* we figure out how to get out of here."

"...Huh?"

That elicited another round of confused blinking.

"How to get out of here? Wh-What do you mean 'how'? You just came here. We'll just go back the way you—"

"The path is blocked. There was a cave-in. We can't go back the way I came. Our only hope right now is that there's an exit somewhere up ahead..."

"What?! Y-You— But that's... That's so cruel! You come here, get all my hopes up, and then you snatch them from me just like that? Y-

You...*monster*! How can you do this to me?" protested an increasingly hysterical Esmeralda.

Anne glared at her, and Esmeralda let out a frightened squeal before falling silent.

"Lady Esmeralda, if we want to make it out of here alive, we're going to have to work together. So, I'm going to need you to listen to me and *refrain from doing anything reckless or stupid*."

After some sulky whimpering, Esmeralda conceded.

"...Y-You don't have to be so mean to me. F-Fine, I'll do as you say."

"All right then. I'm going to look for a way out. In the meantime, you stay here and wait for me. I promise I'll come back for you."

Anne turned and began to leave.

"Wh-What? Wait! Don't leave me here! A-Anne!"

Anne stopped mid-step.

"...Huh?"

She slowly turned around and stared with an odd expression. It made Esmeralda uncomfortable, as though there was something stuck to her face. She wilted a little and looked down to avoid meeting Anne's searching gaze.

"Lady Esmeralda, you... You know my name?"

"Of course I do. What kind of question is that? Do you take me for a moron?"

Anne raised an eyebrow.

"Hey! What's that supposed to mean?!"

"I'm just surprised. That's all."

"'Surprised'?! So you *do* think I'm a moron! Of all the—"

"Oh, it's not that. I don't think you're a moron, but I am surprised that you know my name. I didn't think you could actually remember people's names."

"Of course I can remember people's names. Yours, Nina's, Keithwood's, all of them. I'm offended by the fact that you actually thought I couldn't."

"Then why do you pretend not to know them? I don't really care either way, but poor Nina. How can you do that to her?"

This time, Esmeralda answered with her head held high.

"Because that's what it means to be a noble, of course."

This was how she'd been taught.

*"The noble shall not trouble themselves with the names of the common. To commit the rabble to memory is both a waste of effort and a disservice, for unnecessary attachment clouds judgment. As His Imperial Majesty's most trustworthy subjects, we rule our lands in his service and must at all times maintain a clearness of mind and soundness of reason in the decisions we make."*

*"The noble shall not forget to be grateful to their ancestors. As faithful subjects of His Imperial Majesty, we respect and take pride in the history and culture of his empire."*

*"As a bearer of the Etoile, it is right and proper for only the finest of everything to be offered to you. Expect nothing less, and speak no thanks. Accept that which is normal with normality."*

Esmeralda took her father's teachings to heart, obeying them to the letter. She shaped herself around them, believing without any doubt that it was how she was meant to live. It was why she found Mia's conduct to be endlessly confounding.

"If anything, Miss Mia's the odd one. What does she make of our proud tradition as nobles, I wonder?"

"And that's exactly why I've devoted my life to her," Anne said with equal conviction, earning her a curious look from Esmeralda. "She calls me by my name. She's kind to me, and she takes care of my whole family. That's why I'll do anything for her. If I die, I know she'll cry for me. That's just the kind of person she is, and that's why I'd even die for her. But I can't, because I don't want her to cry, so I'm not going to. I refuse to die here in this stupid cave."

This powerful proclamation shook Esmeralda. She regarded the maid as she digested these words. Anne had said she was willing to give up her own life. That was indeed an expression of deep devotion, but it wasn't as if Esmeralda didn't have plenty of people like that around her too.

Didn't she?

A thin sliver of doubt crept into her mind. For all her outward certainty, she was unable to fully convince herself that Nina and the guards would give their lives for her with equal readiness. And Anne had gone even further, declaring that while she was willing to die, she would choose to live if only so that Mia would not cry. In the endless darkness of the cavern, so suffocating that it was only natural to succumb to despair, her determination

seemed to glow more brightly than even her torch. Would Esmeralda's attendants do the same for her? Was she as profound a presence in their minds as Mia was in Anne's?

*If I died...would Nina cry for me?*

Somehow, she couldn't help but think Nina wouldn't. But what frightened her more was...

*If Nina died...would I be able to stop* myself *from crying? To not feel sad? If there is ever a time when I have to sacrifice Nina's life, could I do it?*

The doubt grew, blanketing the whole of her mind. It was all-encompassing—a philosophical crisis—for it questioned her very identity. What Esmeralda had been doing was, in essence, seeing no evil. She'd used the traditions of nobility as an escape, shielding herself with its dogmatic teachings so she didn't have to feel. So her heart wouldn't ache.

Anne proceeded to take her faltering rationalizations and rip them to shreds.

"Not calling people by their names... Refusing to see them as people... So that you won't feel as bad if you ever abandon them... That's so pathetic. It's what a coward would do. Milady doesn't want to abandon anyone. It hurts her to even contemplate it. So what does she do? She works hard to make sure she never has to. That's why people call her the Great Sage. That's why we all look up to her."

"The Great Sage..."

A forgotten emotion resurfaced in Esmeralda. For so long, she'd looked upon Mia with bewilderment, finding her actions unseemly and utterly absurd. But even so...

"Lady Esmeralda, I'm going to be blunt with you. If you don't want to stay here, then you'll have to come with me. I won't stop for you though, so if you do, you'll have to keep up. So, are you coming with me?" Anne asked with the tone of someone delivering an ultimatum.

The question pulled Esmeralda out of her contemplative spiral. She quickly tucked the thought away, realizing that this was indeed not the time for introspection. With a small nod, she slowly pushed herself to her feet.

# Chapter 7: Mia's Roots

"How mysterious. I wonder why it's glowing like this."

Mia scooped up a handful of water and watched as it drained through her fingers. The act did not leave her with a glowing palm. She'd thought it was the water that was glowing, but the mechanism seemed to be something else.

"It looks sort of like the light from fireflies. Maybe there are organisms in the water that glow," said a pensive Abel before falling completely silent for a few seconds. Then, he restarted with a hint of apprehension, "Say, Mia, do you think this was done on purpose?"

"Huh? That what was done on purpose?"

"This." He gestured at the water. "You remember how Sion said the cave we were in showed signs of being man-made, right? I was thinking, whatever is producing the light in this cave, maybe it was put here by someone. On purpose."

Memories of Esmeralda's story flashed through Mia's mind.

"An evil cult and its underground shrine, huh... I see. That spooky story of hers suddenly feels a lot more plausible, doesn't it...?"

Granted, she didn't actually think they'd happen upon some sort of unholy sanctum down here. Abel, however, had realized the more important corollary.

"Depending on how you look at it, that might be a good thing. If people had a hand in making this place, then there must be a way to get in and out."

"Oh, that's true. There might be an exit up ahead then!"

Even if there wasn't, the path extended in the other direction as well. As long as they followed it, they might just find their way out. Feeling her mood improve, her steps grew lighter.

Unfortunately, the series of winding tunnels they walked through opened onto not the fresh air of the outdoors, but a massive underground chamber. The titanic cavern dwarfed all the others they'd seen so far.

“What...*is* this place?”

It was a baffling sight, eliciting awe and bewilderment in equal parts. The blue light that had lit their watery path now filled the chamber. It wasn’t that whatever was in the water now hung in the air. Rather, crystalline rocks pervading the area refracted the cerulean glow in a million directions, lighting the entirety of the cavern. And standing in the middle of it all, illuminated by the eerie blue diffractions...was a shrine.

Built with rocks so clear they looked like ice, its gigantic pillars and the roof they held were all completely transparent. The structure was a kaleidoscope of reflections, so permeated with the surrounding light that it appeared to be glowing itself. There was something magical about the crystalline shrine, as if it had popped straight out of a fairy-tale. And like most sites of unearthly wonder in stories, there was something foreboding about it. It felt...wrong. The otherworldly sight struck Mia as not just odd but, somehow, almost profane.

“I-It exists... There really is a shrine down here. I’d never have imagined... Could this be the evil cultists’ underground shrine?”

“Who knows? Though the fact that it’s hidden in a place like this suggests it wasn’t built for entirely virtuous reasons...”

He said little more, gazing upon the structure with silent astonishment. She didn’t blame him. Neither of them had ever seen anything like this in their lives. Little about the place could be deduced from its appearance. In what era was it built? Using what methods? By whom? Its architectural context was a complete mystery. There was one thing about it that was clear though...

“Whatever it is...it gives me the creeps,” muttered Abel, voicing the exact sentiment Mia was feeling.

She nodded in agreement. She was gazing upon surreal beauty—the stuff of dreams and fantasy—yet what she felt was a peculiar aversion. Not disgust, but close. Shrines were meant to represent the glory of God. They were supposed to be built with a guiding philosophy of harmony that sought beauty in wholeness. The one before them, meanwhile, gave off a sense of discord. Of imperfection. It wasn’t a definite feeling but rather a vague intuition—things they expected to find were not there, while places that should have been empty were instead filled. No single aberration was particularly significant, but every little deviation from the expected norm

compounded on the prior, resulting in an uncanny whole that was unsettling to look upon, as if it were constantly scratching invisible claws across the nerves of its observers.

"The church of the evil cultists..."

She doubted there were many other structures that embodied the term so well.

"You know, Mia, whenever I hear 'evil cult,' the first thing I think of is *them*."

"Yes. The Chaos Serpents. I was thinking the same thing."

They were people who hated and opposed the establishment of man-made order. If this structure was truly created by them, its twisted design that ran counter to all convention would make sense—an architectural symbol of profanity, sacrilegious through its very existence.

"I think we might have just made an unexpected discovery in an unexpected place!" Mia said with excitement.

After fumbling for so long through the fog of mystery that surrounded the Chaos Serpents, she might have finally seized one of their slippery tails.

"Come on, let's go take a look inside!"

With eager steps, she made her way into the structure.

"This...is really something..." Mia said as she gazed around the shrine's dreamscape interior.

Everything—the floor, the walls, even the ceiling—glowed, bathing her in pale blue light. It was as if there was a small azure sun here in the depths, determined to carve out a kingdom of its own in defiance of its fiery counterpart that governed the lands above.

"For some reason, just standing here makes me uneasy..." she muttered, taking another look at the surroundings.

The shrine had no door or partitions. Inside was just one large open space, adorned by nothing but the thick supporting pillars. And, Mia realized with interest, one other feature far in the back of the chamber. Displayed with seemingly intentional prominence, it was a large slab of stone, cut whole from some cliff or boulder. As the sole opaque object in the transparent shrine, the solidity of its gray stood out against its ghostly blue backdrop.

They walked over and examined the slab.

“Something’s written on it...” said Abel before sighing and shaking his head. “No good. It’s not Continenta. Do you have any idea what language it is, Mia?”

“Yes, actually. This is written in an ancient language of the empire.”

The language that Mia regularly spoke was Continenta—a universal language used throughout the continent. The inscription on the stone, meanwhile, was in a language used long ago in the Tearmoon Empire. She actually knew her way around this ancient tongue too. Learning it had been part of her basic education as a princess.

“Can you read it?”

“As a matter of fact, I can.”

“Really? Brilliant as always, aren’t you?”

She couldn’t resist a smug grin at his compliment.

“I sure am.”

“Is it hard to read?”

“Nope. Not for me, at least,” she said, her sense of competence inflated by her uniquely relevant skill. “It’s a piece of cake. Allow me to read it for you.”

With hands placed confidently on her hips, she leaned forward and examined the inscription. At first, she still managed a few *hmms* and *aahs* for scholarly effect, but they quickly dwindled. Soon she was staring at the stone slab in complete silence, her brows furrowed in an increasingly deep frown.

The ancient words carved into the stone slab told of a man and his twisted conviction. Or, perhaps...his curse. The man, a victim of atrocities that left him bereaved at the loss of all those dear to him, grew to harbor a poisonous hatred that festered at the bottom of his heart. When he came here and discovered this shrine, he also happened upon the Serpents who, driven out of the continent proper, had been hiding on this island.

Finding rapport and resonance in the Serpents’ ruinous ideology and antipathy toward all man-made order, he soon found himself yearning to realize—or, at least, exploit—their entropic ambition to take revenge on the world. The Serpents told him that there existed in the continent a region known as “the Fertile Crescent” where the land was blessed with heavenly favor. The region, with its consistently plentiful harvests and abundant food,

guaranteed the order and stability of the entire continent.

This made sense to the man, for he knew that food was the mother of mercy. So long as men could feed themselves, they could forgive most hardships, or failing that, at least tolerate them. It was only when they starved that they took swords in hand and resorted to wanton violence. Therefore, if he wished to destroy all civilization and plunge the world into chaos, he would need to do something about the Fertile Crescent; its abundance stood in the way of his revenge.

What should he do?

The answer was simple, for the man had been gifted with great intellect. His sharp mind cut like a blade, paring away the superficial obfuscations of human nature to reveal the abyss within. He was a sage of evil, possessing an amazing understanding of the wicked hearts of men.

What, thought the man, should he do with his mighty intellect and his poisoned heart?

He should spread views and beliefs that would defile the Fertile Crescent. He should propagate an ideology that breeds scorn and contempt for agriculture and the production of food.

Where, the man thought, did his greatest challenge lie?

It lay in speed. He needed his ideas to spread quickly and efficiently.

How, the man thought, would he achieve his goal?

The answer was, again, simple. He would build a nation there. Then he would systematically disseminate a doctrine of anti-agriculturalism. The process would feel natural, for the seeds of ruin would be encased in the fruit of regal legitimacy, allowing them to grow undisturbed in the rich, unassuming soil, whereupon they would taint the Crescent's people and drive them to defile their own bountiful farmland, forever robbing it of its fertility.

And so resolved the man.

He would build a nation that drenched the fertile *moon*-shaped crescent with *tears* of suffering. Such was his twisted conviction...and his curse gave birth to an empire.

The man's name was Alexis, the first *Tearmoon* emperor.

# Chapter 8: Princess Mia...Inflates Her Status

"Is... Is this story true?"

"...I don't know if it's true or not, but that's what it says on the rock."

This was a hell of a thing to find. Mia massaged her temples in a futile attempt to ward off the oncoming headache. As if to take one last swipe at her, the slab had a final line of inscribed text.

*Forget not this duty, those of my blood. Ensure it remains in memory engraved. We are loathers of all that is. We are avengers, wieldings chaos and ruin. Forget not this duty, those of my blood, and fight on! Take revenge on the world!*

She stared at the fanatical directive of her ancient ancestor.

*Don't offload your weird obsessions on me, you old fossil!*

A sense of profound exasperation bubbled up at the knowledge that her great-however-many-times-grandfather had felt the need to saddle his descendants with this absurd mission. Was being annoying to their young a thing that ran in her family or something? Still, unwelcome as this discovery was, it did put some puzzle pieces together in her mind. Back during the revolution in Tearmoon, no matter how hard she'd tried, nothing had gone right for her. She'd thought the cause had been the meddling of the Wind Crows—Sunkland's elite spies—operating in Tearmoon, but her assumption had been wrong. The empire had harbored ruinous agents of the Chaos Serpents from the very beginning. In fact, it had grown out of one of them.

*I doubt that every single noble is both aware of and has made it their personal quest to realize the first emperor's goals, but the empire has a long history, and beliefs can gain a lot of momentum over time. I see now why it was so hard to change the course of events back then. Especially if one of*

*the Four Dukes is in cahoots with the Chaos Serpents...*

Her initial reaction to this possibility had been "What?! They've infiltrated that far up?!" This new discovery, however, had put everything into perspective. It wasn't that one of the Dukes had been taken in by the Chaos Serpents. The first emperor was the one who'd fallen under their spell, and that initial, burning ambition of his had merely waned over successive generations. The imperial family had simply forgotten its founding father's creed.

*And good riddance too. I'm glad we did. Why wouldn't we forget?*

It was a valueless ideal. Nothing good could come of it, and plenty of harm. Wasting even an iota of brain space on it would be absurd.

*In fact, maybe we should just pretend we never saw this... I feel like a good number of people would raise a ruckus if word of this got out. Once the weird rumors start spreading, there's no stopping them...*

For regular nobles, the first emperor's ambition was, frankly, a huge pain in the rear. They were the ones benefiting from the system, so they were understandably prone to bouts of voluntary amnesia when it came to directives to upend existing establishments. Over time, it was only natural that the voluntary aspect would fade.

*I'm pretty sure even father doesn't know about this. It's hard to think of something less conducive to enjoying the life he currently lives.*

Forgotten...but not irrelevant. Though ancient, a decree like this still had power. A noble in decline could use this as fodder to mount a political attack and denounce the existing system. It would come as an irreconcilable shock to those who had never questioned their history or culture, accepting their own righteousness at face value.

*Esmeralda, for instance, is one example of a person I should never show this to...*

"Wh-What in the world... Is that you, milady?"

Mia almost leapt out of her shoes at the sudden voice behind her. She was so lost in thought that she hadn't noticed another person entering the shrine.

"Milady..."

Looking at Mia with worried eyes was her loyal maid, who supported with her shoulder a second figure standing with some difficulty.

"Anne...and Esmeralda? What in the moons are you doing here?"

"Never mind that. What about the story? Is it true?" Esmeralda pressed.

Mia glanced at her and clicked her tongue.

*Ugh, literally the* last *person I wanted hearing about this...*

With regard to Alexis, Mia's honest opinion was that he and his will could buzz off. Even if the account on the stone slab was true, and the first emperor had indeed founded Tearmoon with the intent described, she had no obligation to obey its command.

*If I blindly follow the instructions of this lunatic ancestor of mine, I'll just send myself straight back to the guillotine! No way I'm doing that!*

If there was a competition for "most unhelpful object in existence," this stone slab would be the undisputed winner. She felt a strong urge to throw the thing into the sea. Then drop an anchor on it for good measure.

Why did she abhor it so? Was it because of the insidious effects it might have on her people? The lives of soldiers it might cost through civil war? Of course not. It was because she was forever a proponent of the Mia First principle. She wanted to eat sweets and loll in bed all day. A stable empire was necessary for her to enjoy such a life. Ergo, she did not wish to see it suffer revolution or collapse. Before her scrumptiously indolent ideals, those of her ancestors amounted to little more than drivel. No, worse than drivel! They were a menace!

The last thing she cared about was her ancient forefather's reasons for founding the empire. To hell with his vengeance! To hell with executions! If someone brought her a brand new guillotine today, *she* sure wouldn't lop off any heads with it. She'd use it to chop open some hard-peeled fruits to get at their sweet juices. Like guillotine, like empire.

It's not about why something was made. It's about what you do with it.

Of course, there were those who wouldn't and couldn't understand things like that, and the most egregious example of such people was standing right in front of her right now.

*Ugh, why did Esmeralda have to show up now of all times? I swear, she has the worst timing.*

Mia knew her "friend" well. Esmeralda had a strong tendency to conform to the traditions of nobility and the teachings of her parents.

*Unlike me, she can be rather naive. It's too easy to influence her.*

"How... How can this be... The first emperor..." whispered Esmeralda, her voice trembling as she ran her hand along the stony inscription.

“L-Look, Esmeralda, you don’t have to take this so seriously. It’s fine...”

Mia trailed off as she realized she wasn’t being heard.

“Our glorious empire...was founded for this? To do the first emperor’s bidding...”

*Uh oh, this is bad. I’m not getting through to her! She’s in her own little world now!*

The sight of Esmeralda and her hollow gaze caused Mia to panic.

*Aaah! Sweet moons! And she’s a bit of an authority nut too! A message from the first emperor is going to hold a lot of sway for her. I’m definitely at a disadvantage here!*

Mia was, after all, not the reigning ruler but rather his daughter. Furthermore, she and Esmeralda were kin, and they had as much reverence for each other as, say, distant cousins. In terms of regal heft, the first emperor’s words clearly trumped her own.

*Hnnnngh... I need to do something, or Esmeralda’s going to turn into a Serpent too!*

Currently, Mia didn’t think Esmeralda or the House of Greenmoon had anything to do with the Chaos Serpents. It had to be some other house following the first emperor’s deranged philosophy to the letter.

*I mean, father and I didn’t inherit any of this nonsense. And we’re the imperial family! Could you people stop trying to achieve some crazy goal from generations ago that* we’re *not even bothering with?*

The biggest problem was that the first emperor’s words could turn Esmeralda, who was harmless right now, into someone far less innocuous. Mia needed to stop that from happening. After a moment’s consideration, inspiration struck.

*...That’s it! If my word as princess doesn’t carry enough weight...I’ll just inflate my status!*

She couldn’t beat the first emperor in authority, but authority wasn’t the way to fight this battle. Change the rules of engagement, and she’d have the upper hand!

“Listen, Esmeralda...” Mia stepped in front of her friend and gently looked her in the eye. “I know the first emperor’s words carry a lot of weight for you. Far more than my own rank ever will. That’s why...I’m going to phrase this another way. Would you be willing to listen to some advice from *me*? Not the princess, but your best friend Mia.”

Knowing the “princess” she held was a losing bet, she saw the first emperor’s “authority” and raised him “friendship.” While Esmeralda frequently and publicly claimed to be Mia’s best friend, Mia herself had rarely reciprocated. Why would she when she honestly didn’t share the sentiment? Now, however, she was making it official.

“I’m willing to formally acknowledge your position as my best friend, you know? How does that sound?”

Old as it might be, an edict from the first emperor still carried a lot of weight. There was no question about that. It was certainly arguable, if not unequivocal, that every Tearmoon noble should hold him in the highest regard and pride themselves on respecting his wishes. Esmeralda’s attitude was hardly unique; when faced with the first emperor’s words, plenty of nobles would do the same, accepting the first emperor’s words wholesale out of fidelity to the throne.

Put simply, “loyal to the first emperor” wasn’t a unique status. It was actually quite commonplace. “Princess’s best friend” though... Now that had a special ring to it. It was a status in very short supply, mainly due to logistical constraints; there could only be one person who bore that title. Mia might have a hundred tea buddies, but she couldn’t have a hundred best friends. Between the two titles, there was a clear winner.

With the gravity of her new status fully established, Mia then delivered her finishing blow.

“No matter what motives the first emperor might have had when he founded the empire, they mean little now...because there’s one thing that’s far more important.”

“F-Far more important?”

“To rule in peace over a contented people.”

That was the golden rule to lead a golden life. The way to maintain an environment in which every sugar craving could be immediately satiated with a tasty treat. The path to a utopia of rolling around in bed all day without getting a good scolding for it. *That* was a future worth aiming for.

“If the Tearmoon Empire really was created for such a wicked goal...then as of this moment, I officially declare the mandate annulled.” After her echoing voice faded into the cavern’s walls, she smiled. “So, Esmeralda, what do you say? Rather than the first emperor, how about you follow my lead instead? Free yourself from the chains that bind you to an

ancient oath of fealty to him...and forge a stronger bond of fellowship with me, your best friend," she said with the kind of ingratiating smile often employed by sleazy salesmen and serial flatterers.

She emphasized the last three words, "your best friend," as a reminder of this once-in-a-lifetime chance to make the title official.

# Chapter 9: Best Friend

*Ah... She's always like this...*

"Look, Esmeralda, you don't have to take this so seriously. It's fine..."

The sight of Mia standing in front of her with a hesitant smile brought back a memory...

Esmeralda's mind returned to a scene from five years ago. She was hosting a tea party at the Greenmoon residence, and she was a little nervous. For good reason too, because Princess Mia Luna Tearmoon was scheduled to attend. It would be the first time the princess had attended any such gathering. Ever since it had been decided that Esmeralda was going to be the host of Mia's tea party debut, she'd been making meticulous preparations under the guidance of her father. Thanks to her diligence, the party proceeded perfectly smoothly. Visibly delighted by the luscious cake she'd been served, Mia all but beamed at the maid who brought an additional slice.

"My, thank you, uh...Nina, was it? Once I'm done with this, could you please bring me one more slice?" Mia asked, addressing the girl by name and evidently pleased with herself for managing to do so. Apparently, she'd memorized it after overhearing the maids conversing.

Esmeralda couldn't help but smile wryly at the proud grin on Mia's face, figuring the princess must be too young to know the impropriety of her behavior. She decided that as the older one, it was her duty as the big sister to enlighten the princess about the manners of polite society.

"Miss Mia, the highborn do not go around memorizing the names of the commoners. You really shouldn't address the maids by name."

"My? Why is that?" Mia asked with a puzzled tilt of her head. "How come we can't say their names?"

"Well, because..." Esmeralda paused for a moment's consideration. "Because people like you and I are of noble blood. We rule the masses, so we must be higher than them. *Superior* to them. That's the tradition of

nobility."

What she described was something she took for granted. It underpinned her entire worldview...

"That's stupid."

...Only for the young princess to immediately dismiss it.

"It's so much easier to just remember people's names. Why do we have to make things harder for ourselves?"

Mia's words hit Esmeralda with the force of a thunder clap. She'd *never* thought of it that way. So deafening was its impact that...

"I mean, that maid isn't much older than us, right? She looks like the kind of person who'd just keep bringing me cake as long as I keep asking for it. It's obviously easier if I can just call her by name every time."

...She completely missed the latter part of the princess's reasoning.

When it came to her own gratification, Mia had always been a bit...conniving. Even at the tender age of eight, she was already displaying a perceptiveness about human nature and aptitude for calculation, offering a glimpse of the Great Sage of the Empire she would eventually become.

Or, maybe just a glimpse of someone with a Machiavellian sweet tooth.

In any case, whether they bespoke a budding genius or a nascent glutton, (the first half of) Mia's words resonated with Esmeralda. She found herself deeply moved, for they echoed the very sentiments that she herself sometimes grappled with. Remembering the names of her maids, becoming close friends with one of them and appointing her as her personal attendant, sharing pastimes and trading bedside whispers, reciprocating for favors and apologizing for affronts... These were the kinds of interactions she yearned for. They seemed easier and far more enjoyable then her current set up. So why wasn't she allowed to do so? The first time the question occurred to her, she'd gone to her father. His response had begun with a hesitant smile.

"Because we are nobles, Esmeralda. And that's how nobles are."

It was hardly a satisfactory answer, but she stomached it. There was no need to understand. It was how things were. That was all.

That answer stayed with her, and as time went on, it formed into an invisible chain that bound her mind and soul from within. The customs of nobility both molded her identity and shackled her thoughts. That was why she admired the young princess, Mia Luna Tearmoon, who was free from such bonds. But it was a distant admiration, born of a subtle yearning for

something she knew was far out of her reach.

"Listen, Esmeralda..."

Even the exalted words of the founding ancestor of their empire—words that, by their very nature, *should* be weighty and binding—failed to change Mia's attitude. She cast them off, refusing to be chained, and urged Esmeralda to do the same. To not take them so seriously. Faced with authority so overwhelming that Esmeralda couldn't muster the will to resist if she tried, Mia was entirely unmoved.

It was always like that. Every time, unchanging.

Mia, the one who soared above the binds of noble custom as if she had the very wings of freedom, and Esmeralda, the one who gazed up, criticizing her high-flying friend for her eccentric, unprincessly ways that were an affront to the traditions and authority of the imperial lineage. But behind the criticism, there was a yearning...a desire long suppressed, but never entirely withered...

*That's right... I remember now... I've always looked up to her.*

The memory returned to her. Her admiration for Mia had been the source of her long-standing wish to be her best friend. But deep down, she knew the truth. Knew it all too well. She wanted to be, had always *longed* to be, but never could. She...wasn't Mia's best friend. How could she be, when Mia was up there, and she was down here? What she felt on her back wasn't the fluttering wings of freedom but the cold weight of chains far thicker and sturdier than she'd ever realized, and she understood with a painful clarity that she didn't have the courage to cut them off.

She wasn't worthy of being Mia's friend. The thought reared its head again, bringing with it the suffocating resignation that was so familiar to a heart accustomed to despair. And yet...

"Rather than the first emperor, how about you follow my lead instead? Free yourself from the chains that bind you to an ancient oath of fealty to him...and forge a stronger bond of fellowship with me, your best friend."

It meant nothing to Mia. She waded in, brushed away Esmeralda's dark thoughts with nonchalance, and flipped her world on its head. She offered that coveted position of best friend so readily. She welcomed Esmeralda to her side...to choose not loyalty to the first emperor but friendship with her. Implied in her gesture were the unspoken words, *"You can do it too."* And

she did it all with an impish smile, as if this were nothing more than a bit of mischief they'd share. Even so...

"I...can't."

The answer that escaped her lips was no. Was it because of the noble customs that bound her? Or had she capitulated to the first emperor's supreme authority? No, it was neither of those. Those concerns had already melted away before the warmth of Mia's welcome. But there was one thing that lingered. It was a small thorn in her heart, and its sting kept her from taking Mia's hand. She'd had a dream in which she told a haggard Mia she'd host a tea party to cheer her up, only to break her promise. It was just a dream, but the regret lingered with a strange intensity. She knew neither when, where, nor how, but at some point, she felt like she'd betrayed Mia.

It couldn't be real, of course. None of it was, except for the pain it left in her heart. So long as that ache remained, she could not claim to be Mia's friend.

"I... I let you down, Miss Mia."

Her grief moved her to confession.

"You did?" Mia scratched her head. "Really? When?"

"I...told you I'd host a tea party for you...but I never did. I broke my promise..."

Some small part of Esmeralda's mind still clear enough for coherent thought was dismayed at her own rambling. What was she going on about? It was nonsense. Mia didn't know about her dream. This would only confuse her. But to her surprise...

"I see... Well, in that case..."

Mia wasn't confused. She didn't laugh. Instead, her expression was serious, and she seemed to be deep in thought. Eventually, she said, "I want cake."

"Huh?"

Esmeralda blinked.

"Yes, cake sounds good. Extra sweet ones, preferably. I'd like to indulge in some sugar. So once we get off this island, I'd love it if you could invite me to one of your tea parties."

Esmeralda continued blinking. Only after Mia's next comment did she gasp as the true meaning of her words dawned on her.

"There, we'll swear our loyalty to the empire together." She looked

Esmeralda in the eye. “Not to the ancient one trying to destroy the continent. To a new one. A better one, that aspires to a life of peace and stability for all its people and will work tirelessly toward this goal.”

A watery drop landed on Esmeralda’s hand. Confused, she looked up. The ceiling was dry. Only then did she feel the tears streaming down her own cheeks.

*Tears? I’m...crying? But why? I have no reason to cry...*

She felt that faint sting in her heart again, a constant reminder of a promise she’d made in some faraway time and place. It was a tragic promise, for it remained unfulfilled, destined to fade away with the dream that had birthed it.

*That was just a dream. There’s no way Mia could know about it. But...*

She returned Mia’s gaze. For some reason, she felt like she was looking at the Mia of her dream, as if *that* Mia had stepped past the boundary between fact and fiction to offer her a chance to make good on her broken promise. At last, she reached out...

“Okay...I will, Miss Mia. I’ll find the best cake makers and have them prepare the most delicious cakes. And then...I’ll invite you to my tea party.”

...And took the hand of a friend that meant more to her than anything.

The hand of her best friend.

To offer a bit of context, night had fallen when this whole scene was playing out, meaning Mia’s missed-meal-counter had ticked up to three. Skipping breakfast, lunch, *and* dinner had left her very, very hungry. Just so we’re clear.

# Chapter 10: “I’ll Be Right Back,” Said Esmeralda Before Disappearing

“Now then, I have to make it out of here, even if it’s just to attend Esmeralda’s tea party... Anne, how did you two get here? Actually, why are you even down here in the first place?”

After successfully winning Esmeralda over through sheer force of word, Mia began reassessing their situation.

“Yes, about that...”

Mia sighed after hearing Anne’s story.

“So that’s what happened. And the path back is blocked too?”

She’d perked up upon hearing that Anne had arrived through a different route, only to deflate at the news of the cave-in.

“Yes. I don’t think it’s possible for us to clear away all the rock. Also, we’ll have to climb a pretty steep slope,” said Anne with a quick glance at Esmeralda’s ankle. “Unfortunately, it’s unlikely that we can go back the way I came. What about you, milady?”

“Actually, we got caught in something like a cave-in too. The ground below us just fell through.” Mia thought back to the place they’d landed. “I don’t fancy the thought of climbing back up to that opening in the ceiling.”

“Agreed. It’s not realistic, especially when Esmeralda is hurt,” added Abel.

“That cavern back there did stretch in the other direction as well...”

Of course, where it led was anyone’s guess.

“Anyway, let’s first check if there are any exits around this shrine. If we can’t find any, I think it’s best we go back to the place where we first landed. How does that sound?”

The group nodded at the suggestion from their “survival expert,” which could certainly be interpreted as ominous foreshadowing, so it was good that after a brief silence, Anne raised her hand.

“Um, milady, might I suggest that we take a short break? Lady

Esmeralda's foot is still hurting, and you look a little tired yourself."

Almost on cue, Mia broke out in a yawn.

"Phew. I think you're right. Then let's rest for a bit before we get going again."

After a short nap, the group began investigating the shrine's surroundings. Well, the nap was short for everybody else, who split up and started exploring the premise while Mia enjoyed a decidedly longer one. In the end, they found that there were only two paths leading here, one taken by Anne and the other by Mia.

"I wonder if that other path in the cavern leads out? I sure hope it does..." said Mia after waking up and reconvening with the group.

With their options dwindling, the group returned to the cave that Mia and Abel had fallen into, holding onto a sliver of hope that it still held a route of escape. As soon as they arrived, Abel gestured at the water.

"Look. It was already pretty high on our way here, but it's even higher now."

He was right. Places where the water once reached just their ankles now submerged their knees.

"I see. Then there's still hope. If it's rising and falling with the tide, then it has to lead out to sea," said Mia.

Esmeralda squatted down and brought a handful of water to her mouth.

"Yes, this is definitely seawater. There's a good chance it's connected to the outside." She glanced up at the ceiling, then looked around at the group. "I think we should wait before trying to get out though. I've been told that the sea at night is very dangerous."

At Esmeralda's advice, they decided to take another rest, huddling close together to shield themselves from the cavern's cold.

*This chilliness... It reminds me of the dungeon. Ha ha, how odd. This feels sort of fun.*

In spite of her hunger, Mia found that somehow, she was starting to enjoy herself.

*May the moons have mercy...and may we all remember this fondly as an exciting summer adventure...*

Eventually sunlight began to leak in from the ceiling opening, signaling

that it was morning. Strangely, the blue glow in the water disappeared soon after.

*Hm, I wonder if it's from little creatures that only glow at night.*

That left them with a problem. Though the cavern was lit, the path ahead was now shrouded in darkness. The sun's rays couldn't reach any deeper down the tunnel. They could bring a torch, but it would be of little use once they went underwater.

"I knew we'd need this at some point!"

Esmeralda pulled out the pendant dangling from her neck and held it up triumphantly. The stone set in it glowed with a faint light.

"This will allow us to see for a while. None of us know what lies ahead, so I shall go first and scout the way forward. Since it looks like we'll need to swim, I'm certainly most suited for the task."

She threw off her clothes with a flourish, revealing her swimsuit, which she'd been wearing since bathing in the spring. Then she began to wade into the water.

"Wait, let me go." Abel rushed to stop her. "You ladies can rest here for a little longer."

Esmeralda looked at him, making a point of directing her gaze down her nose.

"I don't think so, Prince Abel. Let me put it this way. Would you say you're a good swimmer?"

"Well, maybe not a good one, but I *can* swim..." he said, evidently not convinced by his own reasoning.

Esmeralda laughed victoriously.

"That's right. So stay here like a good little prince and let me handle this. Just so you know, I've gone swimming every summer since I was little."

"But still, I can't let a lady like yourself put herself at risk like this."

"Thank you for your concern, Prince Abel, but you may wish to acquire a better appreciation of your position."

"Position? What position?"

She chuckled at his bewilderment.

"Do you really need to ask? Your position as Miss Mia's future spouse, of course."

"Future spo— What?!"

He stiffened with shock, causing her to burst into an even louder bout of laughter.

“Miss Mia is both my princess and my best friend. As a proud *Etoiline*, I will not allow her husband to be placed in danger. That is simply out of the question. Moreover, this matter is critical to Miss Mia’s own safety as well. Failure is not an option, and therefore, delegation would be unacceptable.”

Anne, who’d been listening to the exchange, was next to raise her hand in concern.

“But, Lady Esmeralda, what about your ankle?”

“Huh? Ankle? Wha— Oh...” Esmeralda, flustered, suddenly seemed to find something about the ceiling very fascinating. “I, uh... I completely forgot about it! How odd! Y-Your treatment, um, Anne, must have been effective...”

That earned her a raised eyebrow from Mia.

“Huh. Really?”

“Wh-What? Do you have a problem with that, Miss Mia?” she asked defensively.

Mia regarded her for a second before smiling.

“No, not at all.” Then, after a deep bow, she added, “Thank you, Esmeralda. I’m glad to be placing myself in your capable hands.”

That helped Esmeralda get back into her usual groove. Smiling back, she said, “And you won’t be disappointed. You have my personal guarantee that I’ll bring back good news. Then, once we get back home safely, I can finally invite you to that extra extravagant tea party I’ve been waiting to host for so long!”

Though it’s generally inadvisable to make conditional statements of fulfilling long-awaited promises after completing a particularly dangerous task, Esmeralda did so with her head held high, entirely unconcerned by the narrative trope she’d just wandered into. Then she did something she’d probably never done before. Her expression softened into a smile that, rather than being sly or haughty, was tender and earnest...

“Don’t worry. I’ll be right back.”

She was not. Her words rang as hollow as the empty chamber in which they waited, anxious eyes staring in vain at the still surface of the water she’d plunged into.

...Well, she wasn't *right back*, anyway.

# Chapter 11: Princess Mia...Is Pulled Along

“That...must be the first time I’ve seen such a sincere smile from Esmeralda...” Mia whispered to herself after Esmeralda disappeared into the water.

It had been an authentic smile, unmarred by caution or ill will. But for some reason, it made Mia uneasy. She didn’t know why, but she was uncomfortably reminded of that day long ago when Esmeralda had promised to host another tea party... When they’d parted that last time, hadn’t she worn the same smile then?

“She seemed strangely dependable that day... Just like she did a moment ago... The similarity is...a little worrying.”

Five minutes passed.

“I wonder if she’s okay...” murmured an anxious Mia.

Anne smiled at her.

“She’ll be fine, milady. It’s only been five minutes. We should believe in Lady Esmeralda.”

“Y-Yes, I suppose you’re right...”

Ten minutes passed.

“...Is she really okay? Oh, I hope she didn’t do something reckless and hurt herself.”

“Don’t worry, Mia. Esmeralda can swim circles around us all. She can handle herself,” Abel said in a buoyant tone clearly meant to reassure.

The slow, solemn nod he received in response, however, suggested efficacy had been limited. From that point on, Mia grew less and less communicative. By the half-hour mark, she looked like she was on the verge of tears, haunted eyes fixed on the water’s still surface. The longer she waited, the more time it gave her to envision the countless ways in which things could have gone wrong. What did it mean for someone to go out to take a look in a place like this...and not come back? The answer was

simple. Her anxious mind filled itself with morbid imaginations, made all the worse by their juxtaposition against the memory of that gentle smile Esmeralda had worn before vanishing...

Mia reflected on her relationship with Esmeralda. It was true that she didn't think of the girl as her best friend. At best, she fell into the "we're friends, I guess" category. However, the more she thought about it, the more she realized that the two of them had some honest history. They'd spent a good deal of time together, what with her hosting Mia's tea party debut and her yearly birthday party invitations. She'd made sure to attend Mia's own birthday parties as well, they'd always celebrated these occasions in each other's presence. Every so often, they'd even had matching dresses made, laughing as they shared both attire and amusement, though such moments had become a rarity with Mia's increasingly busy schedule. At the end of the day, while she didn't consider Esmeralda to be her one-and-only soul mate...they were, in fact, good friends. Good enough for the pain of losing her to draw tears.

"Ooooh, Esmeralda, you..." Mia said between sniffles, "Y-You said you'd be right back...so where are you? Ooooh, I hate you. You're a terrible person... I-I can't believe you'd...break your promise to me again..."

By the time an hour had passed, Mia had dissolved into a weeping mess. Tears flowed freely down her face, their trails barely dried before new streams took their place. She heaved with sobs as Anne held her in a hug, gently patting her back. Just as Anne's own floodgates were about to give way, a large splash sounded behind them, followed by a loud gasp of air. They all whirled around to find Esmeralda, who'd popped out of the water.

"My, I do apologize for the extended wait, but I'm back now," she said with truly comedic obliviousness to the mood in the cavern.

The aquatic exercise seemed to have improved her condition, and she practically glowed, both in skin tone and enthusiasm.

"It's maybe five minutes or so to reach the outside from here. There's a spot where we'll have to dive for a bit, but don't worry. It's short enough that even Miss Mia should be able to manage."

She stepped out of the water and approached them, the glistening drops trickling down her face equal in appearance but opposite in nature to the ones on Mia's. When no one ventured a response, she tilted her head.

"What?" She glanced around. "Is something the matter? What's with

this weird mood?”

"...You really took your time, didn't you?" muttered Mia as she shuffled over, head lowered to hide her expression.

"Oh. Yes, well..." Esmeralda held out the pendant at her chest. "I was gathering some sunlight in my moonlamp rock. The path is a little too difficult without some light. Also, the water was rather chilly, so I decided to warm myself up on this rock that was in the *perfect* position for a quick sunbath— Hm? What's wrong, Miss Mia— Eeek?!"

Mia all but pounced on Esmeralda, wrapping her arms around her and squeezing as if for dear life.

"I was worried, you know? So, so worried! I thought I'd never see you again..."

"M-Miss Mia?" At first, Esmeralda froze in surprise, but her posture quickly softened. "It's all right, Miss Mia. I won't ever let my best friend down. And that's a promise I won't break. Never again..."

She returned the embrace with a tender smile.

After everyone calmed down, Esmeralda proceeded to detail her findings.

"As I was saying, it's not that far, and it's a straight path out, so you can't get lost. There's a place or two where we'll need to be underwater for a while...but if Miss Mia can make it through, I think we'll be fine."

Anne frowned. Being a commoner, she had even less experience swimming than Mia did.

"Hm, in that case, Anne can come with me. We'll go together," said Esmeralda casually.

Mia was next to frown.

"You...*are* Esmeralda, right? Are you okay? Did you hit your head somewhere?"

"Well excuse you, Miss Mia! I just thought that I can perhaps afford to be a little nicer to my best friend's beloved maid, that's all," she protested before her confidence withered slightly and she averted her gaze. "And, well...she's been...quite helpful... I mean, part of being of noble blood is to repay any favors done for you, yes?"

*Ah, Esmeralda, that personality of yours... Always such a handful. Sometimes, I honestly have trouble believing we're related*, thought Mia before nodding to herself.

“All right, we’ll do what you say, Esmeralda. Look after Anne for me, okay?”

They arranged themselves into a line and prepared to head off. At the front was Esmeralda, followed closely by Anne. Behind them were Abel, then Mia. Normally, Abel would be bringing up the rear as their anchorman, but there was a reason he had to stay in front of Mia.

“It’s starting to get deep here. I think your feet won’t touch the bottom anymore.”

“Understood!”

With military efficiency, she nodded affirmation, spun around, and fell onto her back. Like Esmeralda she’d been wearing her swimsuit under her clothes. Without the hindrance of wet clothes, Mia could actually manage an impressively competent back float. Abel, treading water in front of her, grabbed her collar.

That’s right, the reason Abel stayed in front was because he had to swim while pulling Mia along with him!

Their unequal distribution of labor notwithstanding, they made steady progress following the guiding glow of Esmeralda’s pendant. The path, like she’d said, was sufficiently traversable for the whole group. After passing through a few sections where they had to hold their breath and dive, light appeared in the distance.

“We’re almost there, everyone! Keep it up!” shouted Esmeralda from the front of their line.

Her encouragement proved uplifting for Mia, who redoubled her efforts...by flapping her arms and legs around a little more vigorously.

“Ah—”

She shielded her face as light suddenly flooded her vision. Moments later, a salty wind blew past her cheeks. The undulating rumble of the tide began echoing in her ears. Gradually, her eyes adjusted to the dazzling brightness, and a clear blue sky appeared.

“Aaah... We did it... We really did it. We got out safely.”

Relief threatened to sap her of all strength. Or maybe it actually did. It’s hard to tell when one is floating like a limp dishrag. Slowly, she gazed at each of her friends. A little ways in the distance were Esmeralda and Anne. Hovering next to her was Abel.

*I can’t believe it. We all got out alive. It’s like a dream...*

That realization was moving enough, but fate wasn't done with its dreamlike developments.

"Ah! Look! It's the Emerald Star!"

Esmeralda screamed in delight as she pointed vigorously toward the familiar figure of their vessel.

"We're...saved? Does this mean we're saved?"

Mia grinned as she silently answered her own question. A short-lived grin, for it wouldn't be long before she was forcibly recalled to a certain passage in the Princess Mia Chronicles...which detailed the events that had befallen her during her adventures on and surrounding this uninhabited island...

An enormous shadow appeared just below the calm surface of the sea. It approached the hapless group of swimmers from behind, quickly, silently, and completely unnoticed...

# Chapter 12: The Great Hero of the Open Sea, Princess Mia, Lets Out a Fierce Roar!

"See? See? I told you! It's safe and sound! I knew it! My Emerald Star wouldn't sink from some dinky little storm like that! Oooh, just look at it! Not a single scratch! It truly is as majestic as its name!"

For some reason apparent only to her, Esmeralda was wearing a victorious grin. Mia's cheeks twitched—a split-second display of exasperation quickly quelled by the thought that rescue was imminent. So long as they got home safe and sound, she was willing to abide Esmeralda's inexplicable gloating. The big question at hand was...

"So, what should we do? It's a little far to swim, I think..."

The yacht was about 400 m (four hundred moontales) away.

*I'm glad help is here...but frankly, that's a daunting distance to attempt on an empty stomach. If only they'd come get us instead...* She pursed her lips at the thought.

"It'd be so much easier if they sent those little boats our way. Can we somehow get their attention from here?"

Abel eyed the boat.

"A bit too far to shout," he said with a grimace. "Okay. I'll go first and get them to lower the row boats."

With the gallant air of a knight, he nodded at them and promptly swam off.

"Hmm, it pains me to ask Abel to do this onerous task on his own, but swimming all the way there *does* seem pretty difficult..."

Having spent so much time in water, Mia's conscience had taken on some of its fluid qualities. Of course, it flowed only in the direction that suited her, ignoring more pragmatic thoughts such as, "The closer they got, the sooner the rescuers could reach them."

*Aaaah... The sea's so nice. It's so easy to stay afloat. All you have to do is relax*, she thought as she gazed vacantly up at the sky, reverting to her

preferred form—the Waning Aurelia. In her languid jellyfish state, she moved only her eyes, following the vast cerulean sky down to where it turned aquamarine at the horizon. Then she scanned the surface of the water before frowning at what seemed to be a...dorsal fin.

"...Huh. I wonder what that is."

She watched idly as it approached, slicing through the water with speedy grace. A second later, a scream rose behind her.

"Oh no! M-Milady! L-L-Look! It's... It's a man-eating fish!"

"...Eh?"

The words entered Mia's ears...then slammed head-first into the massive "Out For Lunch" sign barring entrance to her brain. Blankly, she looked from the fin to Anne, then back. It rose higher and higher as it neared, and she forced her sluggish mind to consider how big a fish a fin of that size would correspond to.

And then she panicked. Because that was one *big* fish. One big *man-eating* fish. In other words, she was in a life-and-death situation, moments away from being turned into fish food.

"Quick! We need to get away!" shouted Esmeralda. "Swim for the boat! Th-They probably noticed and are sending row boats already! Come on, hurry up!"

She grabbed Anne's arm and began hauling her toward the boat.

"Eeeek! Eeeeeek!"

Mia rushed to follow them. She deftly twirled into a back float and...uh, *flutter kicked* for dear life. She kicked and kicked with her dainty but woefully inadequate legs, throwing up a flurry of little splashes that provided little locomotive value. Coupled with her mounting panic, which worsened her already dubious technique, she was essentially just making a lot of noise without getting anywhere. On top of that...

"Eeeeeek! Eeeeeeeek!"

Her particular choice of position—the back float—made it easy to both breathe and see. The latter, in this case, proved to be more curse than blessing, as she had an encumbered view of the impressively thick and unnervingly tall dorsal fin zooming through the water toward her.

"Aaaaaaaah! It's coming for me! It's so close!"

Normally, massive man-eating fish—like meghalodoons, which Mia was imagining—weren't something humans could simply swim away from. The

creature under this dorsal fin, however, seemed to be in no rush to reach its quarry. It simply followed while she frantically tried to paddle away, closing the distance ever so slowly as if toying with her.

*Ooooh, you stupid fish, trying to make a fool of me, are you? Hmph! In that case...*

Mia stopped and stared at the oncoming predator, her eyes hardening with a warrior's resolve. If she was to meet her end here, then so be it! Besides, if that passage in the *Chronicles* was true, then she was supposedly about to beat this massive carnivorous fish into submission. She could still win this fight! With teeth clenched and jaw squared, she let out a fierce roar no less impressive than the war cries of seasoned veterans charging into their final battle. Well, that was how she'd *intended* it to sound, anyway. To everyone else's ears, it was less a fearsome "Raaargh!" and more a crack-voiced "Meeeeep!"

Mia had no time to consider such frivolities though. She had some fish punching to do. She began swinging her arms around in large circles, exactly the way young boys on a school playground might, thinking it afforded them an impervious bubble of fast-moving fists that would repel all invaders. Her haphazard arm flailing, however, did the unthinkable, and all eyes—except Mia's because hers were firmly shut—beheld the unfolding of a miracle!

One of Mia's hands landed on the massive creature's nose with a splat. Yes, *splat*. She'd failed to fully form fists and had, for all intents and purposes, slapped the thing across its snout. There was a bit of give upon impact, resulting in a bouncy sensation odd enough to make her reflexively open her eyes, whereupon she witnessed a quickly shrinking dorsal fin as her aquatic enemy fled. Shortly thereafter a rescue raft reached her.

"Sweet moons! Miss Mia! That was absolutely incredible! You fought off a massive shark with your bare hands!" exclaimed Esmeralda as she offered Mia a hand.

Mia took it and was pulled onto the raft.

"H-Ha ha... Ha ha ha... O-Of course. Wh-Who do you think I am? That was a cinch. A total cakewalk! In fact, I can go for round two!" she declared with a proud puff of her chest before hastily shuffling to the center of the raft and holding on with white-knuckled strength in fear of falling off. Then, in a tone that was equal parts firm command and desperate, teary-

eyed plea, she said, “W-Well then, I think it’s time to head back. Come on! What are you waiting for? Hurry up!”

...Now, most of you have probably already figured out that Mia did not, in fact, beat a meghalodoon into submission. It wasn’t even a man-eating fish to begin with. Known academically as the ocean fullmoonfish and colloquially as a moonbow, it was a docile creature, a flat fish that swam upright. Moonbows were delicate things, so easily injured that even bumping into a particularly craggy rock could cause their death.

Thankfully, Mia’s awkward punch-slap was weak enough that it managed to escape the encounter unharmed.

*Wow, that sure was a close call,* thought the poor moonbow as it swam quickly away. *Best not to let my curiosity get away with me next time...*

And so, everyone turned out fine, and the peaceful seascape remained undisturbed.

# Chapter 13: Loyalties (Read: Kinks) Come in All Shapes and Sizes

While Mia's group was busy with their underground adventure, what in the world was Sion's team up to? Let's go back in time a little bit and check in...

Sion and Nina scoured the area around the spring in search of Esmeralda. Finding no sign of her, they returned to the cave, only to find it empty as well. Anne, who was supposed to be standing watch, was gone. Mia and Abel hadn't returned either.

"Scorching sun... Is disappearing on deserted islands some sort of new fad among Tearmoon women?"

Sion's flippant tone failed to hide his concern. After touching base with Keithwood, who came back shortly thereafter, he decided to go after the person whose whereabouts they were the most sure of—Anne. The pair of them ventured deeper into the cave, only to discover the path blocked by the cave-in. Doubling back, they then proceeded in the direction that Mia's team had gone. When they came upon a hole in the ground where the surrounding rock had collapsed downward into a black void, Sion was truly left speechless.

Cognizant of his master's fraying nerves, Keithwood spoke in a calm, businesslike tone.

"If they fell...there's a chance they could be immobilized by their injuries."

"Yes, they could be."

The implications of Keithwood's statement were clear to Sion. Even if their friends were still alive down there, getting them back up would be close to impossible. It was hopeless.

*No, don't give up. Keep thinking. There has to be a way.*

Refusing to bend the knee to despair, Sion thought furiously. To his

dismay, inspiration did not come. Instead, it appeared in the form of Nina, who'd been at the beach keeping watch. She jogged over and said, "The Emerald Star is back."

"Really? In that case, tell the crew we need their help *now*. If they have rope, we might be able to get down this hole. There's still hope—"

His racing thoughts were brought to a screeching halt when she informed him that there was no need. He stared, utterly dumbfounded.

"What? They're...all fine? And on board already?"

He remained bewildered as they headed for the vessel themselves, muttering phrases such as "What in the name of the sun?" and "Damn it, Mia, what magic is this?" the whole way there.

The crewmember manning the row boat they boarded enthusiastically described Mia's feats. "Let me tell you, it was *something*! She beat that massive thing into submission! Downright incredible!"

After listening to the story, this sentiment was understandably unchanged.

"What in the name of the sun? Damn it, Mia, are you even human?"

In any case, Sion's trio rode their boat with brightened spirits as it returned to the yacht. The knowledge that their friends, whose deaths had seemed all but guaranteed, were not only rescued but completely unharmed brought a profound relief that loosened lips and gave way to banter.

"Speaking of which, Miss Nina, you don't have it easy, do you?" quipped Keithwood.

"I'm not sure I understand what you mean," Nina replied with a puzzled tilt of her head at the abrupt comment.

"I mean your mistress, Lady Esmeralda. Dealing with her must be grueling."

She frowned for a second. Then her gaze drifted upward.

"That's not so. I enjoy the work I do in serving her..." she said with no obvious signs of joy.

"You do? Really? But, I mean, she doesn't even call you by name—"

"That's the best part!"

Keithwood recoiled a little at the sudden exclamation and swallowed the rest of his sentence. Nina, having lunged slightly during her reply, righted herself and let out a small sigh. Then she spoke in that tone of voice used by teachers to explain to a particularly rambunctious child why their behavior

was inappropriate.

"She's not clingy. That's what I like about her. We maintain a professional distance. The dry, businesslike nature of our relationship is what I find most appealing. It's so good, and I'll never get enough of it."

Both Keithwood and Sion listened with the expression of someone trying to decipher a foreign language. Nina, undeterred by their blatant confusion, kept going. The knowledge that Esmeralda was safe along with her present absence had apparently opened some sort of conversational floodgate in Nina. She spoke with increasing enthusiasm.

"And sometimes, she'll forget and almost say my name before correcting herself. The way she panics and stammers a bit while she puts on the act again is something I make a point of savoring. The fact that she adores Her Highness and wants to spend time with her but can never muster the nerve to just *ask* is delightful as well. And watching her hatch this elaborate plot in which she'd wear a revealing swimsuit to seduce the visiting princes, only to chicken out at the last moment... The way she gets so timid, it's *so good*..."

To Keithwood, Nina sounded like some sort of wannabe-artist insisting that there was artistic merit in a random roadside pebble she just picked up.

*This...is definitely beyond me. She's living in another world.*

As if she'd read his mind, Nina patted Keithwood on the shoulder and said, "To think that you can't appreciate milady's appeal... I pity your taste in women, Keithwood. Besides, doesn't the pleasure of serving lie in the constant scramble to keep up with your master's whims?"

"Ah. Well, I must respectfully disagree with your former point, but I do concede some resonance with the latter."

The two shared a knowing, conspiratorial chuckle. Though they both served difficult masters, it seemed that they felt a certain fulfillment in doing so. The trouble was worth it, because it was part of the fun...

Sion, meanwhile, looked from one attendant to the other, the source of their mirth a complete mystery to him.

After being pulled onto the deck of the Emerald Star, Mia celebrated their safe rescue with her fellow adventurers: Abel, Esmeralda, and Anne. The yacht had apparently sailed away to take shelter, only to be damaged during the storm anyway and drifting away. The repairs had taken some

time, which the captain apologized profusely for, but as they had been necessary, no castigation ensued. Not long after, Sion, Keithwood, and Nina returned with the search party that had been sent to the island.

As soon as he climbed onto the boat and confirmed everyone was in good health, Sion turned to Mia and said, "You have *got* to stop trying to give me a heart attack, Mia. It's good that Esmeralda was located in one piece, but...honestly, *what happened*?"

"It's a long story, but you won't believe what we found underground. I sure don't."

"Try us." Sion managed a wry smile. "The fact that we got everyone back on the boat in one piece is crazy enough. How much crazier can this day get? Oh, I heard you punched away some monstrous fish? Is it even crazier than that?"

Nina afforded the talkative pair a single, sidelong glance before walking over to Esmeralda. After making sure that her mistress was indeed in good condition, she let out a sigh of relief.

"Milady, I'm glad you're of sound health," she said in her usual monotone.

"Hm? Ah, yes... Though I did twist my ankle a little..."

"I see. I regret allowing you to incur injury on my watch. Please accept my deepest apology for your inconvenience."

"No, it's not your fault... It was me... I went off on my own..." Esmeralda said in a hesitant, mumbling manner.

She looked around with a pleading gaze, which settled beside Mia on the figure of her maid, Anne, who smiled back and gave her a subtle thumbs up. Invigorated by her fellow spelunking comrade, Esmeralda nodded and drew on her borrowed courage.

"I...know you must have been worried, um...N-N-Ni...Nina..."

"...*What?*"

Her momentous effort to say the name of her maid was rewarded with a strange expression.

"Uh... What's gotten into you, milady? Why are you using my name all of a sudden?" asked Nina, much more flustered now than she'd been when she heard of the ankle injury.

Esmeralda replied with genuine repentance.

“I’ve reflected on my own behavior. I’ve been terribly rude to you all this time. You probably never realized, but I do actually know your name. I’ve always known it, and still...I’m sorry for how I’ve treated you.”

After this heartfelt apology, Nina...

“Um, seriously?”

...Was less than impressed. In fact, she seemed profoundly disappointed.

“Uh, milady... You really don’t have to do that. Just...be yourself. Like you’ve always done, okay? Feel free to call me ‘you’ or ‘that maid over there’ or...whatever you want.”

“My, whatever do you mean? Is there a problem with my calling you by your name, Nina?”

“It’s a matter of...image. Appearances should be kept up. Uh... Oh, think about the House of Greenmoon’s proud traditions. Or the norms of nobility. Calling maids by name is unacceptable by any of those measures...” she answered in flat rejection of Esmeralda’s budding metamorphosis. “In any case, just don’t do...whatever it is you’re trying to do. Really. It’s fine.”

Faced with this unexpected development, Esmeralda’s gaze shifted toward Anne again. This time, the other young woman failed to meet it, choosing to glance out to sea instead.

That day, Anne learned something new. Loyalties come in all shapes and sizes, and everyone has their own *tastes and preferences*.

“All right, I think I’ve had my fill of this island. Let’s go home!”

There was nothing to be accomplished by staying any longer. At Mia’s command, the Emerald Star began sailing back to Ganudos.

# Epilogue: Prelude to Battle

Two days after departing for the island, the Emerald Star made a late but safe return to Ganudos Port Country. Waiting at the dock was the whole Greenmoon retinue, along with the Princess Guard.

“Aaah, we’re finally back... I’ve missed the smell of civilization.”

In general, the Emerald Star afforded no end of luxury and extravagance to its passengers, but for Mia, the inability to take a comfortable bath was an issue that critically impeded her ability to enjoy her time aboard the yacht. Consequently, she breathed a sigh of relief as the boat entered the harbor. The relief seemed to be shared by most of her friends, as tension visibly drained from the faces of the pair of princes and all the attendants, exposing everyone’s underlying fatigue. Deserted islands, as it turned out, could be quite grueling for those who weren’t used to spending time on them. The only one who remained in high spirits was Esmeralda.

“Your Highness, we are overjoyed to see that you have returned safely.”

As soon as she stepped off the boat, Ludwig approached, trailed closely by Dion and Vanos.

“Yes, I’m glad to be back too... *That* was an experience I’m not eager to repeat anytime soon.” She stifled a yawn with only moderate success before gazing wearily up at Ludwig. “Save the questions for tomorrow. Tonight, I’m going to enjoy some leisure time at Esmeralda’s place.”

“I see... In that case, I’d like to request permission to have Sir Dion and Sir Vanos accompany you as guards.”

“...Oh?”

She frowned in confusion for a second before the subtle tension behind his words sunk in, allowing her to catch a whiff of the danger in the air.

“...I take it there have been some developments that warrant increased vigilance, then? All right, I’ll ask Esmeralda if I can bring some extra guards...”

Not only was the request okayed immediately, Esmeralda even allowed Ludwig, along with the whole company of Princess Guards, to stay at her

manor. The sheer cooperativeness she displayed would have been unthinkable only a few days ago, and it was enough evidence for Ludwig to reach a certain conclusion.

"So she's done it at last... Her Highness has finally worked her magic on Lady Esmeralda and brought her into the fold."

Mia and company made their way to a villa in Ganudos that the Greenmoons owned. Of great relevance was the fact that the villa was equipped with a small but fully functional bathhouse, meant to be used after a dip in the sea. Understandably, Mia made a beeline for it upon arrival and proceeded to soak in some warm, watery luxury for a while. Afterward she put on a fluffy gown and dove straight into bed.

"Oho ho, it feels so good to be back in a soft bed," she said, kicking her legs happily as she rubbed her cheeks against the blanket with such enthusiasm that it looked like she was trying to dig through it with her face.

Her bedding excavation was soon interrupted by a request for an audience from Ludwig's party.

"My, Ludwig's here? Hm... What he mentioned at the dock was indeed a little concerning. It's fine. Let them in."

Ludwig entered with Dion in tow, the former's eyes widening at the sight of Mia in total post-bath leisure mode.

"I see that you must be tired. I apologize for interrupting your rest."

"I don't mind. It's a little too early to sleep anyway."

"A little too early" was an understatement, considering evening had just barely begun, but no one offered any comment. The only hint of amusement came from Dion, who simply smiled in silence.

"I see," continued Ludwig. "The reason for my hasty visit is that there is some pressing information we discovered about Ganudos, which I felt we should share with you as soon as possible."

"There's plenty I need to tell you about as well. All right. Let's hear your side first."

Ludwig proceeded to describe his findings, which suggested there was conspiracy afoot in Ganudos, but its existence had been obfuscated by its exceedingly labyrinthine nature.

*Who would have thought there'd been a conspiracy like this behind the revolution that had engulfed the empire...*

She was left reeling after he finished and had to compose herself before recounting what she'd found on the island. In truth, she still wasn't sure if the stone slab had been real or its claims authentic, so she was having trouble figuring out what to do with this piece of knowledge moving forward. She was hoping Ludwig the Thing-Figure-Outer-er could point her in the right direction.

"This stone slab you said you saw... It certainly lends credence to the theory that our ancestors came here by crossing the Galilea Sea..." said Ludwig with a deep sigh when Mia finished recounting her story.

He walked over to the room's desk and spread open a map.

"The shrine you found is probably on one of these islands here. Past it, beyond the rest of the Galilea Sea, lies more land. According to the theory, somewhere there is the place our ancestors used to call home. For reasons unknown to us, they crossed the sea. Judging by the inscription on that stone slab though, it's probably safe to assume the reason was some sort of conflict of which they were the losers."

The loss likely came with an immense cost in terms of life. After losing so many of their own, these ancient people probably sought safe haven beyond the sea, whereupon they arrived at that island.

"And the leader of these weary travelers... The one who inspired this group of destitute people on the verge of despair to take heart once more and continue their journey...was our first emperor. Leading them further across the water, the place where they finally made landfall..."

"...Was here," said Dion, continuing Ludwig's reasoning. "Right here in Ganudos. So that's it. Even back then, the rough outlines of this conspiracy were already starting to form in our first emperor's head. That's why he forged a secret pact with the people here before advancing onward to the Fertile Crescent. He needed to secure a supply route of food that he could cut off at will."

Ludwig nodded in agreement before falling into a period of silent contemplation.

"Or..." he finally said, "the first emperor left someone here. Someone he trusted. Ganudos Port Country was founded by local fishermen banding together, but the person who rallied those fishermen in the first place might have been a relative of his. Then, the first emperor tasked another one of his trusted subordinates, the Duke of Yellowmoon, with supporting this newly

crowned King of Ganudos in laying the groundwork for this whole scheme."

"The oldest and weakest of the Four..." whispered Mia. "The House of Yellowmoon, huh..."

It suddenly occurred to her that she had no concrete impression of the Duke of Yellowmoon. His daughter was supposed to be enrolled at Saint-Noel Academy, but Mia had no idea what she looked like. It was almost as if their whole family was hiding from her. Or, at least, behaving in a fashion intended to evade notice.

"So, what'll it be, Princess? For the sake of simplicity, how about I just go and, y'know..."

Mia looked up just in time to see Dion making a slicing motion with his hand. Having been absorbed in her own thoughts, it took her a moment to realize what he was implying.

"What? No! Absolutely not! Imagine the mayhem you'd cause!"

Conspiracy or not, they were dealing with an Etoiler. Assassinating one of the four pillars of Tearmoon nobility would cause no end of problems. More importantly, she had a personal reason for eschewing the more slice-and-dice-y solutions to this issue, which stemmed from a profound confidence. Specifically, a profound confidence in the competence of her enemy. If they killed him and he somehow leapt back through time as well, she wouldn't stand a chance against someone with such skill and foreknowledge. So she much preferred a solution that didn't involve the man dying.

"Also, don't forget that the famine is going to strike next year... When that happens, we'll need the help of all the nobles in the empire. Losing the Duke of Yellowmoon now will only cause unnecessary chaos throughout his faction."

It'd be simple if every single noble affiliated with the Yellowmoons was guilty of conspiracy, but if there were a good number of innocents, eliminating their entire faction would, in effect, be playing into Yellowmoon's hands due to the inevitable turmoil that would ensue.

*Ideally, we'd pinpoint all the people in the House of Yellowmoon who are connected to the Chaos Serpents, tie them up, and have someone else in his family succeed the Duke's title. It'd be really nice if the Duke was the only one actually following the wishes of the first emperor and participating*

*in this conspiracy...*

Mia sighed and shook her head.

“Can we post some more eyes around the Duke of Yellowmoon and his people? And investigate how deep within his faction this conspiracy goes?”

Ludwig regarded her for a solemn moment before inclining his head.

“If that is Your Highness’s wish, then I shall see that it is done, or die trying...”

Thus, the battle began. It was a battle to abolish the pact of the first emperor and free the Tearmoon Empire from his ancient chains. How will it end? Who will be the victor? What is the fate of the empire and its people? The answers are yet a mystery to all.

*Part 2: The Lodestar Girl Fin*

*To Be Continued in Part 3: A New Oath Between the Moon and Stars*

# Side Chapter: Bel and Her Small Piece of Happiness II

Bel was fond of these brief moments just before dinner as dusk faded into the darkness of night, for this was when she'd be given a good wash while listening to stories of the grandmother she admired. It might, in fact, be her favorite time of day...

She sat in a barrel filled with water as a soft washcloth soaked beside her. In the winter the water was bone-chillingly cold, but in the summer, its chilliness was quite comfortable.

Elise fished out the washcloth, wrung it, and began wiping down Bel's back. The life of a fugitive, lived in constant hiding, afforded few luxuries. Rarely could Elise give the young girl a proper bath, but even so, she was determined to do whatever she could. Together with Bel's other guardians, she strove to keep her, if not radiant, at least clean and presentable. She wasn't about to let a descendant of the Great Sage of the Empire walk around without a suitably pleasing appearance. Not on her watch. So, she set about cleansing the young girl's delicate skin with gentle strokes.

Suddenly she froze, washcloth and hand stopping over the all-too-prominent contour of a dainty shoulder blade. Below was a slender back with little fat or muscle. She bit her lip. Bel's lean, bony form reminded her of her own younger self, and the texture of her skin lacked all the softness and shine one would expect to see from a princess.

*You should be eating better...living better... I want you to, but... I'm so sorry, Mia...*

A wave of helpless anguish threatened to consume her.

"I still can't believe she punched away such a big fish though. Grandmother Mia must have been really good at swimming. Right, Mother Elise?" asked Bel in a cheery treble.

Elise faltered at the sudden question. Its abruptness stemmed her tide of

grief, but a second wave of subtle regret soon followed. Like Mia, Bel was a very bright girl. She must have noticed Elise's darkening mood and brought up the lighthearted topic on purpose.

*Bless her soul. She's trying to cheer me up...*

Having realized that, Elise forced herself to reply in an equally cheerful tone.

"Yes, she was apparently very skilled. According to Anne, she was beautiful when she swam, like a crescent moon in the water."

"Wow! That's amazing!"

How exactly one went about swimming like a crescent moon...was not a question Bel concerned herself with. She didn't try to imagine what it might actually look like. It sounded beautiful, and that was good enough for her. She clapped with glee, enjoying the spirit of the description rather than its words. Bel, you see, was a sweet girl, innocent and willing to take things at face value.

"That's not all, you know? Your grandmother was the kind of person who could do anything. She was good at poetry and playwriting too, I heard. The first time we met, not only did she read through the novel I was writing in the blink of an eye, she even guessed the rest of the plot I had in mind."

That moment during their first meeting still gave her chills every time she remembered it, the astonishment it evoked entirely unabated by the passage of time. It was almost magical how she'd recounted the exact story Elise had been meaning to write, then praised its quality.

"It made me so happy..."

Bel listened with eyes as wide as her gaping mouth.

"Wooow... Grandmother Mia was an amazing person, wasn't she?"

"She sure was. What else was she good at? Let's see... Oh, of course. She was great at riding horses."

"Riding horses?"

"Yes. During her time at Saint-Noel Academy, she was part of the horsemanship club, and her skill was apparently top-notch. I've heard stories about how she even rode one of the legendary winged horses..."

If Bel's eyes could've gotten any wider, they would have.

"A winged horse?! They really exist?!"

Faced with this extremely valid question, Elise smiled...

“Mmm hm hm... Who knows? Maybe it was just a joke someone told, or maybe it was metaphor. But knowing her, I wouldn’t be surprised even if it was true.”

...And gave a politician’s answer! Saying winged horses did exist would be an outright lie. Even Bel wouldn’t believe such a blatant falsehood. Probably. However, Elise’s answer had incorporated the technique of obfuscating nuance, arguing that while she didn’t know whether winged horses were real or not, if Mia *did* indeed ride one, she wouldn’t be surprised. In doing so, she avoided giving a firm answer. This way, she could claim to hold reasonable doubt and tout her calm rationality while simultaneously using that ostensible objectivity to laud Mia’s skill. In essence, she’d changed the question from “Do winged horses exist?” to “If they did, could Mia ride them?” which she could then answer with a resounding yes.

...Truly, a technique of utmost underhandedness. Poor Bel, who had no immunity against such unscrupulous methods, fell for it immediately.

“Grandmother Mia is so amazing!”

Oh, but she was such a sweet girl. Her innocent marvel pleased Elise, further inflating her enthusiasm.

“That’s right. And if she could ride winged horses, there probably wasn’t a horse in the world she couldn’t ride perfectly. Big ones, little ones, fast ones, strong ones... All of them. I bet she could even ride a unicorn.”

“No way! A unicorn?”

Through the diligent education she received from Mia’s most loyal subjects—Elise, Anne, and Ludwig—Bel grew up innocent and trusting, readily believing in the word of others. She was such a sweet girl. So sweet that it made you a little worried about her future.

“That’s so amazing. I wonder how she looked when she was riding. I wish I could have seen Grandmother Mia on a horse.”

Bel’s eyes continued to sparkle with wonder.

While her beloved Mother Anne finished making dinner and her beloved Mother Elise told her stories about the grandmother she admired, Bel savored these fleeting moments of time...one of her small pieces of happiness.

# Part 3: A New Oath Between the Moon and Stars I

## Prologue: Ludwig...Soars!

After three days of rest and recuperation at the Greenmoons' villa, Mia promptly took her leave of Ganudos Port Country. Though it seemed unlikely that Ganudos would make an overt attempt on her life, the principle of better safe than sorry still urged her to make a hasty exit.

"Aaah... Is it just me, or did the weather decide to get hot just as we're about to leave the coast?"

Oddly, the day of their departure happened to be the one exceedingly hot day in a summer that had mostly been cool. Stuck in her poorly-ventilated carriage with only Ludwig and Anne—Sion and Abel had left early for their respective kingdoms—she languished in sweaty lethargy.

*Ugh, it's so hot... And we were literally just at a summer retreat that can beat the heat. I almost wish we could have spent another two or three days relaxing there... That reminds me, didn't Chloe say something about how the northern nations are cool even in the summer? Hm...*

In a heat-fueled half-stupor, she idly murmured, "Aaah... I want to go north..."

That immediately put a ruminative frown on Ludwig's face. Following a span of contemplative silence, he nodded in comprehension and said, "I see... So that's it... Brilliant."

"...Eh?"

She managed to turn her head enough to give him a baffled look. He smiled reassuringly back at her.

"If the first emperor's conspiracy is true...then it's the older, more powerful houses that are most suspect. The longer the noble lineage, the

less trustworthy they are. Conversely, newer noble families, the outcounts for example, are both more trusty and easier to persuade. I believe I'm correct in my understanding so far?"

The Tearmoon Empire had started with an initial cluster of noble domains surrounding Lunatear and had progressively expanded its borders northward and southward. An inevitable consequence of this growth was the existence of newly acquired land, which was referred to as the outlands. Since Outcount Rudolvon was in the south, they should look to the north for their next potential ally...

So explained Ludwig to confirm with her.

"Have I misconstrued any of your reasoning?"

Yes... Yes, he had. All of it, in fact, from the very first word to the very last.

"...N-No, that's uh...pretty much what I was thinking. Good for you. You figured it out. I trusted you would, Ludwig."

Wave rider Mia, however, wasn't about to point that out. No matter how small the wave, she'd flop over and let it push her along. She'd finally mastered the ultimate technique—the back float. With this in her arsenal, it no longer mattered what kind of wave was coming, because she was impervious to drowning! So long as someone else took the lead, all she had to do was to go with the flow!

"In that case, I believe it's best to bring along with us someone who is expert in these matters... Factoring in the correspondence time, could I have...about three days to prepare?"

"Certainly. I see no problem with that."

So it was decided that Mia's company would take an important detour.

"I must respectfully mention, Your Highness, that I would prefer to have advance notice before needing to make such arrangements."

Within the capital of Gildan Outland County, which lay to the north of the empire, Balthazar sat in an inn, looking like he hadn't slept in days. Three days, in fact. Ludwig, whose estimate had been spot on, simply looked his friend in the eye and said, "Get used to it."

After mercilessly snuffing out Balthazar's hopes for a less anxiety-ridden future, Ludwig promptly got down to business.

"So, let's hear it. What do we need to know about beforehand?"

“Outcount Eerikki Gildan. Twenty-eight years old. He inherited the domain from his father and is trying to breathe some new life into it. Like most of his peers, he’s been indoctrinated into anti-agriculturalism by the central nobility.” After scratching his head, Balthazar added, “Apparently, he wants to use his farmland to build amphitheaters and playhouses and such. He’s thinking of throwing up a bunch of amusement facilities and turning his domain into a vacation spot for nobles. I’ve come here a few times trying to talk him out of it, but I don’t think I’m making much headway.”

That got Mia’s attention.

“Really now...”

*This place* is *on the cooler side. It’s actually pretty good for a summer retreat. There’s no sea nearby, but it’s still a lot more comfortable than Lunatear. I like how this guy thinks...*

The way Mia saw it, if there was a place where she could be safe from the heat while enjoying all sorts of entertainment, then she would be more than willing to spend her whole summer there.

“So he’s trying to sustain the local economy by turning the domain into a tourist resort. For a place without deposits of natural resources such as ores, it’s arguably the correct course of action, but...” Contemplative creases appeared across Ludwig’s brow for a few seconds before he shook his head. “In any case, let’s meet the man first and see what he has to say.”

Upon arriving, Mia was led into the reception room of Outcount Gildan’s manor. Some time later, Eerikki Gildan appeared. Mia studied him.

*Hm, first impression isn’t bad. Nothing about him is particularly grating...*

He didn’t flaunt his wealth through overadornment like the nouveau riche were wont to do, nor did he wear the alien garb of pagan tribes. Rather, his appearance was so utterly normal that it bordered on boring.

Of course, this should hardly come as a surprise. Though the region still bore the outland name, it had been incorporated into the empire before Mia had been born. It would be ridiculous to expect the people here to still be running around in furs and pelts.

*I suppose the connotations of the word “outland” make you expect certain things...*

“Your Highness, it is an honor to be graced by your presence. I am Eerikki Gildan, and I have had the privilege of governing this land as an Outland Count of the empire.”

“I’m pleased to meet you, Outcount Gildan. Thank you for receiving us on such short notice.”

Mia put on her best princess smile and curtsied.

“It is our rightful duty as vassals to comply with Your Highness’s requests, as well as our greatest honor. We Gildans are glad to serve. But I must ask... How exactly may I be of service?” asked the outcount in a puzzled tone.

“I heard you’re thinking of reducing your farmland to make space for all sorts of new facilities,” said Mia, cutting straight to the point. “I’m here to inquire about that.”

“Ah...” Gildan stole a glance at the figure of Balthazar standing behind Mia and smiled in comprehension. “I thought it might be related to that.”

He straightened, held his hands together before him, and looked directly at Mia.

“I am unsure if Your Highness is already aware, but due to my domain resting along the northern edge of the empire, the climate here is cold, making it difficult to grow crops. Therefore I’m planning to repurpose all the unusable farmland and build vacation villas there, at least use the land to establish some new industries. I’m currently in the process of persuading the local residents.”

*Hmm... I’d say it’s about half truth and half pretext.*

Mia calmly analyzed his answer. The part about it being difficult to grow crops was likely true. Chances are, he honestly didn’t think the land here was suitable for farming. However, the influence of anti-agriculturalist beliefs from other nobles probably played a larger part in his reasoning.

“Mmm. I understand your intention. But I must say, shouldn’t you preserve such a unique trait of your domain? You’ve been gifted so much farmland. It seems a waste not to use it.”

Her suggestion drew a chilly response.

“What an odd thought. What use is having vast swathes of farmland when it’s worthless in the eyes of the empire?”

*And there it is. I was expecting it to rear its ugly head. Ugh...*

She resisted the urge to hold her head in frustration. The seeds of anti-

agriculturalism had sprouted throughout the empire, and the sheer tenacity of their roots was astonishing. This was not going to be an easy problem to solve. Nevertheless, she plowed on.

"A fair point. But worth can be a fickle thing. How much are large, extravagant buildings worth if no one gathers inside them? Certainly not any more than the dirt of the farmlands sacrificed to build them. Even if you put up all these big stone structures like amphitheatres and playhouses, are you sure people would come? If they don't, you'll have ruined all your farmland and lost your agricultural productivity with nothing to show for it but a bunch of useless piles of rocks. That would be a tragedy I do not wish to witness."

She could tell that Gildan had not begun this project on a whim. He'd done his research and possessed proper knowledge about how to attract people to his domain and make them spend money. However, his idea was nothing new. There were plenty of other people doing similar things. Even if he spent a fortune building a tourist spot out here at the northern extreme of the empire, would people show up? Come all the way to what was basically the middle of nowhere just to see some sights? That was the line of logic Mia had employed to try to shake him up a little.

Granted, it was somewhat of a devil's-advocate approach, because if there existed a place that could beat the heat and offered amphitheaters and playhouses, you can bet Mia would be making a beeline there every summer.

*A nice, cool place with lots of fun things to do? That sounds marvelous! If I can find some ice candies there as well, then it'd literally be the best place on earth!*

Despite her own burning desire to lounge in Gildan's planned resort, she forced herself to take the opposite side in this debate. Like a true leader, she valiantly sacrificed her personal feelings for the greater good.

"Therefore, if you'd like to develop your domain into a resort and make it more attractive to tourists, I'd prefer for you to do so while maintaining your current level of agriculture."

"...And how exactly would I go about doing that?" he asked, the look in his eyes adding an implicit *all right, if you're so smart, let's hear* your *plan.*

"Good question. Let's see... For example..."

A vision of Saint-Noel's garden suddenly flashed through Mia's mind.

The flowers there, all grown under Rafina's meticulous care, were a wonder to behold. It occurred to her that when it came to activities involving soil, Tearmoon nobility was a little hypocritical... If she could convince Gildan to plant fields of flowers, it would at least preserve the land's potential for agriculture.

Ultimately, Mia's goal was to stall for time. She just needed to keep the land farmable until the famine struck next year. Once people got a taste of that, they'd stop tripping over themselves to reduce their farmland. With that in mind, she proposed, "How about planting some flowers?"

"...Huh? Flowers, you say?"

She nodded vigorously at the wide-eyed Gildan, clearly caught off guard by her suggestion.

"Saint-Noel Academy is home to a beautiful garden. It's absolutely worth a trip there just to see it. I often have to stop myself from pestering everyone I meet telling them about it. What if you created an equally spectacular garden here? One that everyone would want their friends and family to see? That way, you wouldn't have to ruin the land."

"But...would that really be enough to draw tourists to the domain?"

"It would depend on the beauty of the flowers you plant, I suppose... I'm reminded that according to the teachings of the Central Orthodoxy Church, the heaven to which we go after our deaths is filled with beautiful flowers as far as the eye can see. If you advertised this domain as a summer retreat for those who wish to experience heaven on earth, I suspect people might be interested."

Gildan fell into a pensive silence. Then he abruptly looked up at her.

"I'd like to ask one thing, Your Highness. Why are you going to such lengths to preserve the farmland here?"

For a brief moment, Mia struggled for an answer. *I can't possibly just tell him I know a famine is coming so I don't want to lose any farmland...*

While she'd previously confided her premonition to people like Ludwig, Outcount Gildan was another matter. He couldn't be expected to believe such an outlandish claim. That left her with only one option. Wrangling the muscles of her face into the most arrogant smile she could muster, she declared, "Because *I* want a garden as beautiful as Miss Rafina's, of course! What other reason do I need?"

She played the "selfish princess" card! Being the first thing to come to

mind whenever most people thought of her, the card remained effective.

*Hah, muscling a demand like this through is a piece of cake. When the princess wants something, the princess gets it! Bow before the power of her title!*

Gildan watched as Mia puffed out her chest at him in haughty confidence.

"...I see."

He nodded with the slow rhythm of a man who'd just gained new insight.

Mia had made just one miscalculation, and it was her assumption that the man before her, Gildan, was just another garden-variety noble. He was actually an incredibly capable person. Having ravenously sought out information regarding Mia, he'd already learned that there were some who referred to her as the Great Sage of the Empire.

So he read between every last line. Armed with foreknowledge of her epithet, he arrived at the meeting ready to match wits with a honed mind and converse in the careful, predictive approach of opponents across a chess board. He chewed over her every word, trying to pick through layer upon layer of superficial connotations to perceive the true meaning hidden within. He dug deeper and deeper until he struck gold. Or hit rock bottom. But at least *he* believed he'd struck gold.

*I see. I heard that Princess Mia is very benevolent toward us outland nobles. After learning about the miserable state of my domain, she's come to urge me to find a solution that minimizes the burden on my people...*

Gildan had, as a matter of fact, been working his rear end off to keep things running. Despite his efforts, there were still farmers who held him in contempt, and the slightest misstep could irreversibly shake their faith in him. Furthermore, the construction cost of massive structures such as amphitheaters was astronomical, and he didn't have nearly enough money to foot the bill. Consequently, going ahead with the plan would result in enormous debt, effectively pushing his back against the wall, and a paper-thin wall at that, with disaster waiting on the other side if he failed. *If I instead went with some sort of project similar to her proposal...the expenditures would be relatively minimal, and I wouldn't have to borrow money. Moreover...*

It would allow him to advertise the project as something Mia commissioned to compete with Rafina. If he could go around billing his resort as “Recommended by Princess Mia,” it would drum up a great deal of interest. The Emperor himself might even pop by. The central nobility would be forced to change their dismissive attitude toward this domain.

*Just planting flowers during the summer would indeed minimize the burden on my people. If that’s enough to turn this place into a resort that brings in foreign revenue...*

Numbers and equations quickly formed and reformed in his head as his mind whirred with calculations.

Meanwhile, Balthazar, who stood beside Ludwig, had been watching the exchange with increasing astonishment. When it finished, he struggled for a few speechless seconds before speaking in a trembling voice.

“Use the time when they’re not growing wheat...to plant flowers and keep the soil healthy... Is that what she’s suggesting?”

“Hm? What do you mean, Balthazar?” asked Ludwig, puzzled by the comment.

Balthazar, fists clenched like he was trying to get his emotions under control, looked at him with wide, excited eyes.

“I don’t blame you for not knowing. I only recently learned about this myself...but apparently, if you keep planting the same crop in the same place over and over, the soil degrades, and the crops get sick. It’s called monocropping, and it’s a hazardous practice.” He lowered his voice to a whisper before continuing. “I heard that’s why in Perujin Agricultural Country, they always plant two different types of crop on the same patch of land. It prevents that kind of damage from occurring to the soil.”

“What the... Are you serious? How come we’re not promoting this practice in the empire then?”

“Unfortunately, farmers are a conservative lot, and they don’t like tinkering with their farmland. And then there’s our old friend anti-agriculturalism, which robbed all the noble lords of their interest in agricultural reform. God, I hate that stupid belief.”

Balthazar shook his head, bitterly mumbling about how normally, this would be the exact kind of situation where a bit of heavy-handedness from the ruling class could actually do a lot of good.

“But then along comes Her Highness and this genius proposal of hers,” he said, brightening again. “The farmers in this domain have already swallowed the bitter pill of giving up their farmland. They’ve managed to stomach the idea, but you can bet they’re not happy about it. If you tell them you’ve figured out a way for them to keep their land, and all they have to do instead is plant a bunch of flowers during the off-seasons between wheat harvests, they’ll sing your praises for days on end. There’ll be close to zero pushback.”

And what about their lord? Gildan himself shouldn’t oppose the idea either. So long as the proposed “heaven on earth” garden made his domain a sufficiently attractive destination for nobles looking to beat the summer heat, he’d have no reason to complain. Being able to publicize the domain as having Mia’s official seal of approval would only sweeten the deal. At this point, the chances of him continuing to insist on throwing away his farmland were very low.

“Which means all that remains is to find the right flower to simultaneously act as the second crop and lure in all the nobles...” said the nodding Ludwig, who now shared Balthazar’s awe.

“It makes you wonder... Could Her Highness have planned this out in such detail that she even has a certain species of flower in mind already?” said Balthazar in a soft, ruminative tone before dismissing the thought with a grimace. “No. She has shown us the way and even led us to the water. We can’t possibly ask her to help us drink. It’s time to make ourselves useful. Leave the flower selection to me then. I’ll handle it.”

With a sidelong glance, Ludwig studied Balthazar, who was visibly brimming with fresh motivation.

*With that said*, thought Ludwig, *it’s an undeniable fact that these northern lands are unsuited to farming...and yet she still made a point of coming all the way here. I can only assume she’s sending a message to the nobility that farmland is not to be reduced, no exceptions, even if it’s in the bleak north...*

In speculating on Mia’s actions and figuring he’d deduced her true intentions, Ludwig had inadvertently set himself up for another jaw-dropping realization down the line when this northern land eventually birthed a breakthrough, and a pair of brilliant researchers from Saint Mia

Academy, Arshia and Cyril, succeeded in growing a new, cold-resistant strain of wheat in its harsh soil. Utterly flabbergasted, he'd almost fall over from sheer shock upon learning of this discovery.

"How far..." he'd mutter through the astonishment-induced vertigo, "just how far does she see? Are you telling me...that even this had been a part of her plan all along?"

So would he spread his wings of delusion and soar, flying higher and higher into the limitless sky of his own misconceptions.

# Chapter 1: Weight Loss Occurs! ...To the Princess Mia Chronicles

By the time she departed the Gildan domain and finally arrived back at the capital, Mia was visibly exhausted.

“Aaah, for a pleasure trip, this sure has worn me out...”

Employing this and a host of other excuses, she managed to spend a good ten days lounging in bed. Alas, the world wasn’t nearly kind enough to allow her to remain in slacker mode undisturbed. Two days into her bedroom sabbatical, Ludwig began showing up to update her on the empire’s domestic situation. Nevertheless, she refused to stop lounging, pausing only to hear his reports. After all, she was a princess, and princesses had *principles*. This was a matter of pride. She’d decided to lounge, so by the moons, she was *going* to lounge, interruptions be damned!

“I have to say... Who would have ever thought that the empire’s low food self-sufficiency rate was the first emperor’s fault...” she murmured as she skimmed Ludwig’s most recent report. “Then again, I guess it’s not *all* his fault. Outcount Gildan’s actions, at least, are understandable given his situation.”

The climate in his domain was not conducive to farming. He’d given the problem proper thought and was trying to improve the living conditions of his impoverished people. His heart was in the right place.

“But what about the other nobles? How are they seeing this situation and still thinking about reducing their farmland? It seems pretty obvious that the empire will topple sooner or later if they keep at it...”

“That which they do not wish to see, they eventually stop seeing. Such is the nature of man, whose eyes perceive only the things that favor their situation.” Ludwig sighed and shook his head. “If only everyone could be like Your Highness and listen with an open mind, accepting the information for what it is...”

Mia shook her head as well, but in gentle refutation.

“That’s not true... There are times when I also look away from things I don’t wish to see...”

It was a sincere acknowledgment of a bitter memory. She was painfully aware that she’d been guilty of that exact offense. In her mind, she entered the archives of remembrance and reached toward the files of the previous timeline. And then she kept reaching! And reaching! Her metaphorical hand extended all the way to a file from only a few days ago, detailing an experience she’d had on the deserted island.

*I...was too embarrassed to read the Princess Mia Chronicles, so I didn’t really give it the proper attention...*

She’d distanced herself from unfavorable things. She’d written the book off as unreliable, figuring its excessive exaggeration rendered its content more fantasy than fact. The consequence of her neglect had been that episode in the sea.

*I’d never have thought a monster fish like that could actually exist... It was downright terrifying! Judging from the size of the fin on its back, its mouth must be big enough to easily swallow a person whole...*

An image of an aquatic titan with massive, serrated teeth appeared in her mind.

*There was a passage about that episode. The book told me it would happen. I could have known about it beforehand... Ugh, what a terrible mistake. I should have been better prepared. I was lucky it came for me, so I could fight it off with that magnificently decisive strike of mine, but if it had gone for Anne or Esmeralda first... Or, merciful moons, if it had eaten Abel...*

The mere thought of harm befalling those dear to her made her shudder.

*This won’t stand. I* must *do better... Never again. I won’t ever make a mistake like that again. From now on, no matter how uncomfortable the truth is, I swear I won’t look away!*

...Just a quick reminder for those of you getting pulled into the seriousness of the scene, the fish Mia defeated was not a man-eating colossus but a moonbow, arguably one of the most docile creatures to ever grace the open waters.

Nevertheless, Mia resolved to revisit the Chronicles once she returned to the academy and properly peruse its contents.

As summer break was drawing to a close, Mia arrived back at Saint-Noel. Upon entering her room, she was greeted by an enthusiastic Bel.

"Welcome back, Miss Mia!"

Something about the girl looked a little different. There was a wholesome glow to her skin. Maybe too wholesome. Her cheeks seemed fuller. Her face...rounder. Mia let out a small gasp.

"My, Bel. You've gotten a little chubby..."

"Hm? Did I? Ehe he, are you sure about that? I don't think I have."

Bel grinned. Mia sighed.

*She must have figured she could get away with eating a lot more sweets while Anne's gone. Honestly, Lynsha's far too soft on her...*

Then, remembering the haggard sight of her when they first met, Mia reconsidered. Having some extra fat was much better than being skin and bones.

"Bel, you should get some exercise. It'll be good for you. Go join the horsemanship club and we'll do some riding together. I'll teach you to dance as well."

"Really? You'll teach me yourself?"

"That's right. Now that I think about it, when winter rolls around, there'll be the Holy Eve Festival, which will involve dancing. I intend to make sure that when my granddaughter steps onto the dance floor, she doesn't make a fool of herself."

Hearing that she would receive personal instruction from Mia, Bel's eyes sparkled with excitement.

"Really? Thank you so much, Grandmother Mia! I'll try my best!"

Mia gave her a pompous teacherly nod before adding, "Oh, I almost forgot. Bel, could I ask you to show me your copy of the Princess Mia Chronicles?"

"Huh? Sure, of course..."

Though puzzled, Bel promptly went to her bed and pulled a book out from under her pillow.

...What was it doing there? Was she using it to prop up the pillow? Had the venerated book been relegated to the function of height adjuster? Questions that shall remain unanswered...

*This girl can be sloppy in the strangest ways sometimes. I wonder who she gets it from...*

Mia tilted her head in genuine bafflement.

"Here you go."

Bel held out the Princess Mia Chronicles.

"Thank you."

As soon as she took it in hand, Mia frowned.

"My, that's strange... Is it just me or did this book lose some weight?"

She remembered it feeling heftier. Currently, it was only about half the weight of her diary. She used her fingers to gauge its thickness. It was definitely slimmer than before.

"How odd. Say, Bel, are you sure this book isn't missing a page or ten?" she asked idly as she flipped it over and continued her careful examination.

*Hmm... I don't see anything unusual...*

She'd suspected that someone who knew the secret of the Chronicles had ripped out some of its pages, but there were no signs of vandalism. If anything, it seemed more like a different, thinner book...as if it had been made that way, and this version of the Chronicles had been written as a shorter volume to begin with.

*So strange. I wonder what happened to—*

Her thoughts cut off when she opened the book, for she immediately realized the severity of the problem. The Chronicles of Saint Princess Mia she held in her hand...was a complete biography, recounting her life from its beginning...to its end.

"Wh-Wh-What in the..."

And if a book that detailed the entirety of her life was *thinner* than before, then inevitably, her life was...

"I-I-I'm...going to die?! Th-This winter?!"

Mia Luna Tearmoon. Died at the age of thirteen years and eleven months. Killed on the night of the Holy Eve Festival.

# Chapter 2: Miabel...Introduces Her Grandmother to a Friend!

"Wha— But... How? Huh?"

While her mouth struggled to form words, her mind couldn't help but race along.

*Sweet moons... But how exactly did I die?*

The inability to resist checking her own cause of death was a tragic aspect of Mia's nature. With guillotine and poison having had their turns, what was next in line? Would she die a peaceful death? Or another violent one? This aspect of her death was what she most wanted to know. She quickly thumbed through the book. And at the end...

"Attacked at night by bandits and killed... Then my corpse gets chewed on by wolves? This definitely does not sound like a good way to go..."

She shuddered. Succumbing to poison while bleeding out of every pore was a pretty gruesome image, but this one wasn't much better. It might even be worse, considering the former at least happened in bed.

"W-Well, I guess if I'm killed before I get eaten, then at least the getting eaten part doesn't hurt... Still, how in the moons did I end up getting murdered by bandits?"

She might not go around reminding people of it every day, but Mia was still the Princess of Tearmoon. There would certainly be value in holding her hostage, but there was no mention of a ransom demand either.

"...Which means I must have been killed before they could capture me. Was I shot with an arrow? Or stabbed with a knife? Ugh... Ooooh... I'm starting to feel sick just thinking about it..."

She shambled unsteadily over to her bed and fell into it face first.

"...Why was I even being attacked by bandits to begin with?"

After another read through of the Chronicles, she discovered a few more details. Firstly, she'd snuck out during the Holy Eve Festival and left Saint-Noel Island. Apparently, the bandits had attacked her while she was

galloping on a horse across the plains outside the island.

"I see... Hm hm... Mmm..."

She read and reread the relevant pages, then let out a long sigh.

"Nope. I still have no idea how any of this happened. What in the moons?"

She couldn't even imagine why she'd sneak out of Saint-Noel during the Holy Eve Festival. It seemed like such an implausible act. What could have made her behave so?

"Somehow, I get the feeling it was for some stupidly trivial reason... Fortunately, if I stay in the academy, then there shouldn't be any problem. As long as I'm careful and never leave the island, I'll be fine... Probably."

Saint-Noel Island was a safe zone crafted by Rafina. Trespassing was by no means easy. Nonetheless, Mia couldn't rid herself of a lingering hint of worry. After all, it would happen on the day of the Holy Eve Festival. Traffic in and out of the island would reach its annual peak during that time. Of course, in order to guard against assassins, there would probably be intense scrutiny of anyone coming in.

But what about those going out? Wouldn't it be possible to hide in some sort of outbound vehicle? What if she secretly pressed some money into the hands of a merchant, asking to be taken out for an evening horseback ride? Could she get herself off the island? Perhaps. But even then, how exactly did she end up dead?

"In any case, letting my guard down would be a fatal mistake. My best bet is to hunker down on the island. I'll still need to prepare for emergencies though, just in case."

Under these circumstances, the first thing she needed to do was preemptively figure out what kind of things could happen during the Holy Eve Festival. Foreknowledge was critical.

"I'll have to start by asking Miss Rafina about what she's planning to do for the festival. Time to do some information gathering." She paused and pursed her lips as another thought came to her. "Also, since it says I leave on horseback... I'll need to improve my horse riding skills."

She was up against professional bandits. And maybe wolves as well. So long as she rode a horse though, she should have a chance of getting away.

"The less I weigh, the faster the horse runs. I think I'd better focus on the horsemanship club's activities for a while. Hm. Now that's settled..."

Having figured out her plans for the immediate future, her attention began to drift toward a different point of interest. The Chronicles ended with her death. Therefore it told her nothing about how the academy city project went, whether the new strain of wheat was developed, or the effects of the famine. Even more pressing was the question of...

*What about my kids? Bel especially... If I died so young, then Bel, who's supposed to be my descendant, couldn't possibly have been born... How does that work?*

She turned to Bel, who was scratching her head, and studied her. Nothing seemed to have changed about the girl. That didn't seem to line up with the account in the book.

*Don't tell me... Was Bel lying to me? Is she actually the assassin and been tricking me this whole time?!*

She stared hard into Bel's eyes. All she got out of it was a few innocent blinks and a bemused tilt of the head. Those plump cheeks of hers exuded an utterly placid aura far too removed from the violent imagery of assassins to seem plausible.

*Besides, she was the one who brought me the Princess Mia Chronicles in the first place. It'd be strange to believe the book but not her. If I trust one, then I should trust the other too. In other words, there has to be some other reason why things aren't lining up.*

Humming in thought, Mia looked back and forth between Bel and the book. After a quite lot of head swiveling she arrived at a conclusion.

"Ah... I get it now. So that's why. It—whatever 'it' is—got lazy..."

There was a profoundly satisfying moment as a piece clicked into place and the whole thing suddenly made sense to her. Her logic, in a nutshell, went as follows.

Rewriting passages in her diary or the Chronicles was probably not too difficult a feat. It could be accomplished with little effort, so their contents changed frequently. However, Bel was a different matter. Rewriting the memories of a human being...or even their very existence, making them disappear and reappear...these were probably very difficult. Whatever was doing this rewriting would probably find it intensely annoying to keep changing the entire fabric of reality for every little thing she did. Surely even reality-rewriting beings got tired.

*So God or whatever's doing this probably decided to wait until the*

*course of history is firmly pointed in a direction before fixing everything else to match.*

The more she thought about it, the more sense it made, and the simpler it seemed. It was like how the cafeteria worked. Changing the flavor of jam for her bread was easy, but if they had to overhaul the whole dinner menu over and over, the kitchen staff would have a fit. They'd tell her to wait until she figured everything out before giving them the order. In fact, she vaguely recalled being told this very thing in the previous timeline. Of course, that had been back when she could still throw her weight around as the selfish Princess of Tearmoon, so the complaint had been worded in a very roundabout manner.

*Oho ho, I'm onto you now. You're trying to do as little work as possible. Who'd have thought that supreme deities could be lazy too?*

Having arbitrarily assigned a personality trait to this higher being, she proceeded to arbitrarily feel a connection to it. She was at a point where she felt she could pat it on the shoulder and say, "I feel you, man."

However, as a result of doing such intensive brainwork, she failed to hear what Bel had been saying.

"Uh, Miss Mia? Are you listening?"

"Huh? Oh, uh... No, I wasn't. Sorry about that." She huffed out a sigh and shook her head. "There's so much going on. I had to take a moment to sort out my thoughts. Could you repeat what you were saying again?"

"Okay. I was talking about how I met someone during the summer break, and we became really good friends. I'd like to introduce her to you."

"My, Bel, you made a friend? Certainly. I'd love to meet her."

Mia quickly got out of bed and put on a gentle, grandmotherly smile, which promptly turned into a strained, twitching half-grin when Bel opened the door. For good reason too, because the young girl who walked in...

"It's an honor to meet you, Your Highness." She had the sweetest smile. "I am the daughter of His Imperial Majesty's faithful vassal, Duke Yellowmoon. My name is Citrina Etoile Yellowmoon."

# Chapter 3: Princess Mia, Embodiment of Truth

"...Eh?"

Mia gaped at the girl. Her golden hair was soft and wavy. Every breeze that fluttered it sent a pleasing floral aroma wafting through the air. She regarded Mia with faintly rosy cheeks and a sparkling smile. Gradually, however, a shade of puzzlement began to enter her gray eyes. Which was understandable, considering Mia had been staring wordlessly at her for a while now.

*Uh oh, bad move.*

Coming back to her senses with a start, Mia hastily smiled back.

"Nice to meet you. I'm Mia Luna Tearmoon. I do hope we'll get along well," she said with a polite incline of her head. "I must say though, considering the Yellowmoons are our relatives, it's an odd feeling to be meeting you for the first time only now."

"Yes, and I apologize. It's a very upsetting thing for Rina too. I was born in poor health and have been weak ever since... I couldn't even attend Your Highness's birthday parties."

"My, I see. I'm sorry, I didn't mean to pry."

Citrina let out a dainty chuckle.

"Oh, you're too considerate. It's all ancient history now."

She smiled. There was a sweetness to it, like a flower swaying in the wind, or a bird singing in the trees. It was a flawless expression from a flawless girl, who seemed in every way the ideal daughter of a powerful noble. She was endearing and affable and she smiled often. All smoothed edges and rounded corners, there was nothing pointed or grating about her. It was practically impossible to have a bad impression of her.

Which was why all the alarms in Mia's head were going *Vring! Vring! Vring!*

*After all this time, the daughter of Duke Yellowmoon decides to*

*approach me? Th-This is super fishy! Actually, everything about them is suspicious! How come I don't even know this girl?! What in the moons is going on?!*

She had no memories of Citrina in either timeline. Never mind Citrina, she could barely recall *anything* significant about anyone from the Yellowmoon household. That stood in stark contrast against the other three Houses, all of whom she had indelible impressions of.

*"After all, we're only notable for the age of our line, and among the Four Dukes, we're the weakest..."*

At some point, she'd heard a self-effacing comment to that effect, but could remember little else. Information regarding the Yellowmoons was egregiously lacking. As an anxious Mia tried to figure out how she'd ended up in this situation, Bel eagerly continued the conversation.

"Rina— Uh, I mean, Miss Citrina and I met in the library, and we've been studying together ever since."

"Ah, uh... W-Well, I see. How...nice of you to do that, Citrina. Thank you. I hope it hasn't been any trouble."

Mia eyed the young Yellowmoon, who bowed her head without a hint of guile.

"Not at all, Your Highness. You're both very welcome. I only regret not introducing myself sooner. Please accept my sincerest apologies."

"Uh, don't worry. It didn't really bother me."

She continued to study Citrina.

*It's true that ever since she enrolled here, she hasn't paid me a single visit. So why come now of all times? There has to be something behind this!*

The revelation of the first emperor's motives, along with the slimming down of the Princess Mia Chronicles...and now, the sudden appearance of someone from the House of Yellowmoon. Something told her this was all connected. She could almost feel the thread linking them...

*This is definitely suspicious! It smells like a fish market in here right now!*

Great Detective Mia had a hunch, and it was telling her that the girl standing in front her was the perp!

*Maybe I should put my foot down and tell her to stay away...*thought Mia, figuring close association with the girl was too risky. After some deliberation, she decided, *No, if I push her away, she might just do things*

*behind my back instead, and that's even scarier. I might as well keep her where I can see her. And she's giving me a chance to do that right now. If the enemy gives me an opening, I should just take it. I'll establish a proper relationship with her so I can monitor her more easily.*

It was the same logic she'd used when pulling Sapphias into the student council.

*Also...*

She looked at Bel, who was grinning ever so innocently. The sheer joy emanating from her granddaughter as she introduced her newfound friend was something Mia didn't want to take away. Of course, she'd still probably put a cautious word in with Lynsha.

"Well then, Citrina, I certainly hope you'll stay good friends with Bel."

"Yes, of course. I'm happy to have made such a wonderful friend."

And there it was again. The flawless, blooming-flower smile. It only made Mia warier.

*Hmph, go ahead. Try something sneaky. If you do, I'll catch you red-handed—*

"Oh, by the way, is it true that Your Highness has some interest in herbs?"

Citrina's abrupt question caught Mia off guard.

"Hm? My... I'm surprised you knew. Did Bel tell you?"

"No, it was just a rumor. Wild grasses and flowers fascinate Rina too. I used to go on foraging trips in the Yellowmoon domain, and I read books to learn more."

"...Really!"

Mia looked at Citrina anew. She'd thought for sure the girl was one of those creepy types who stayed holed up in her room all day planning all sorts of shady schemes.

*Hmm... I didn't think she dabbled in the arts of survival as well. What a shame. If we weren't enemies, we could be discussing how to survive in the event of a revolution. That sounds like so much fun too...*

She found herself slightly disappointed by this realization.

"Oh," added the girl, "and mushrooms too. They're lots of fun, aren't they?"

And, with that one word...

"My! Citrina, you like mushrooms?!"

Citrina had her hook, line, and sinker.

"Yes. As a matter of fact, I've been researching mushroom stews too, and I sometimes experiment with the mushrooms I pick. Stews are so wonderful."

"My! ...*My*! I've always wanted to try stewing mushrooms myself! Could you show me some time?"

Citrina flicked up her rod, and Mia came flopping out of the water on the end of the line.

"Of course. Let's go mushroom picking together then."

A jolt of sheer excitement shot down Mia's spine. Such a proposition was unheard of for her. Picking mushrooms in the wild was an inherently risky activity, and no one had ever dared invite her to do so. She all but beamed, and her friend-o-meter for Citrina shot to eleven.

*You know what? Maybe Citrina's actually just a really nice girl. Her dad, Duke Yellowmoon, might be a good-for-nothing conspiracy plotter, but she might not be involved in any of it...*

Within seconds, her guard had been dropped so low that going down any further would require shovels.

People see that which they wish to see, and blind themselves to that which they do not, and Mia was the living embodiment of that truth.

# Chapter 4: The Expiration Date of That Grudge

Now then... After chatting up a storm with Citrina about mushrooms and deepening their friendship, Mia went to see Rafina in her room.

“Hello, Miss Rafina. It’s been a while.”

Rafina’s expression changed to a radiant smile at the sight of Mia at the door.

“Gosh, Miss Mia. It really has, hasn’t it? Please come in.”

“...Right. Coming in, then.”

Mia’s expression, meanwhile, was stiff as a rock. It was hardly surprising, since she had to report to Rafina that the first emperor of Tearmoon had been in cahoots with her mortal enemies, the Chaos Serpents, and was complicit in their conspiracy.

*Okay, this is Miss Rafina. Surely, she of all people won’t insist on the idea of ancestral sins being inheritable...*

Even so, the report was not a fun one to make. Worse yet, that wouldn’t even be the main topic of discussion for the day.

*I need every bit of information I can get about the Holy Eve Festival so I can prepare. Fate has given me another death sentence, and I need to get out of it somehow...*

Her morbid resolve must have shown, because Rafina fell silent for a few seconds while studying her face.

“Let me go make some tea. I also have some berry pie I saved for just such an occasion. I’d love it if you had some with me.”

“You do? I’d love some!”

With that, Mia’s mood experienced a V-shaped recovery. As she nibbled on the scrumptiously crunchy crust, enjoying the flavor that tickled her tongue, she let out a sigh of pleasure.

“Aaah, the mild sweetness of this crust...it goes perfectly with the tartness of the stellaberries. A wonderful pairing. This is happiness in pie

form.”

Seeing her grinning from ear to ear, Rafina smiled too.

“Ha ha, I’m glad you feel better. So, did you have a good summer vacation?”

The question pulled Mia out of her epicurean reverie and reminded her of why she was there in the first place.

“Ah, well, it was...a very meaningful summer vacation. I’ll say that much at least.”

She proceeded to tell the story of her summer, the island, and what she found there. What had seemingly begun as a tale of adventure on a tropical island veered with narrative whiplash at the appearance of the first emperor. By the end, even Rafina couldn’t hide her astonishment.

“Wow... I see... Who would have thought the Tearmoon Empire had such a secret...” murmured a pensive Rafina. She let out a short sigh. “Let me get this straight. Basically, a long, long time ago, there was an evil cult that was banished from the continent. They were the people who would later go on to become the Chaos Serpents, and they went into hiding on a small island in the Galilea Sea, where they lived in secret.”

“That underground shrine they built was really quite something.”

The work that must have gone into that eerie lighting, allowing them to work in the dark... It bespoke the technological skill of those who had resided there.

“Investigating that place might turn up some information about the Serpents’ roots. That shrine in particular is worth taking a closer look at. We can learn a lot, like in what era it was built based on its architectural style, for example...” After another period of quiet contemplation, Rafina continued. “Then there came a turning point for the island’s residents, which was the arrival of the tribe of hunters. They were the ancestors of the modern Tearmoon people. Under the leadership of the first emperor, they met the Chaos Serpents and, sharing a similar plight of exile from their homeland, found resonance in their sentiments and beliefs...”

“I’m not sure if it was just the first emperor who went Serpent though, or if the other nobles were influenced as well...”

“There’s also the question of the degree of influence. Did the first emperor really take the Serpents’ teachings to heart? Was he a true believer? Or was he simply using them to further his own ends?”

Neither Mia nor Rafina were strangers to conspiracy, and this shared experience made clear that in terms of complicity, the spectrum could range from the White Crows on one end to Jem on the other.

"It's not hard to imagine that someone with the brilliance and capability to craft an empire the size of Tearmoon could simply take advantage of the Serpents, employing their doctrine, their logic, and their believers alike all for his own ends. On the other hand, considering he went so far as to build an entire empire to satisfy his own desires, you could also say he's obsessive to the point of being delusional, which suggests a deep-seated worship of the Serpents' ideals isn't exactly unthinkable either."

At that, Rafina paused and frowned.

"Something just occurred to me. What about your father? Is the current Emperor of Tearmoon aware of this?"

"My father?" Mia pictured her father's face. "Definitely not."

Her answer was swift and certain. Her faith in her father was unshakable. She trusted in him with all her heart.

"The only thing father ever thinks about is how to get me to like him more."

More specifically, she trusted in how all-consuming his annoying nature was. Someone who'd use an imperial decree to make his daughter call him "dad" would never participate in a conspiracy that could endanger her.

"Ha ha, I see neither of us have it easy. The imperial family certainly threw a wrench into the first emperor's works with, erm, how some of their descendants ended up. Of course, it's thanks to your father's eccentricity that we can laugh about this discovery right now."

Rafina smiled, though the expression was a tad wry. She said nothing else, her brows furrowing as she fell into a contemplative silence, as if some new concern had just made itself apparent to her.

"Is something bothering you?"

"No, not so much bother as... Well, I was just wondering if someone with the competence to craft a nation from scratch would have been blind to the possibility of his descendants deviating from his original plan..."

She took a sip of tea, pausing with eyes closed to collect her thoughts. Then she continued.

"Bliss, Miss Mia, erases grudges. Resentment withers when happiness grows. Such is the nature of these things. When people become emperor, do

they really continue to harbor the bitterness of their ancestors and satisfy that ancient desire for revenge?"

It was an extremely apt question. For example, a son might seek revenge for his father's grievance. That was plausible. A grandson might even try to avenge his grandfather. But what about a great-grandfather? Or a great-great-grandfather? How far back could it go? Was it truly possible for people to continue harboring a desire to avenge ancestors they'd never even met?

"The act of building a nation inevitably requires one to rule over a people. It necessitates their ascendance to the highest seat of power. The man in question accomplished this and became the first emperor, ensuring his imperial position would pass down to his descendants, as it has to your father and you. But would those descendants, after ascending to the throne themselves, keep to his mission? Would the second and third emperors harness the power of their empire to ruin the world? *Their* world? When *they* are living happy lives? Would they destroy it all just to settle their ancestor's grudge?"

It was highly likely that at some point, they'd go "To hell with revenge!" and decide to just enjoy their lives. The first emperor's grand plan was doomed to fail from the start.

"It seems like an awfully critical flaw... A blind spot, perhaps? Or was even that part of his plan?"

While Rafina contemplated the scope of the first emperor's machinations, Mia was busy harboring her own grudge.

*Whatever they thought, they're all a pain in the neck! The first emperor, father, all of them! Why is my family so full of nutcases? I'm the only one who's sensible and competent! Ugh, this is why I can never get a break...*

She shook with indignation at being the underappreciated workhorse of her lineage, inadvertently illustrating the plight of all the actual sensible, competent, and underappreciated workhorses around her. Ludwig and Keithwood, hang in there. Anyway...

"Uh, Miss Rafina, could I...ask you to send some people from Belluga to investigate that island?"

Normally, she'd prefer to send her own team of investigators from Tearmoon to scour the place, but with the first emperor's conspiracy having come to light, that option was off the table.

“It can’t be a descendant of the conspirator who takes charge, after all...”

“True... That island might hold valuable information pertaining to the Chaos Serpents’ origins. This isn’t something Belluga can afford to sit out.”

Rafina’s ready acceptance of the task made Mia feel a little better.

“Thank you very much. I’ll ask Esmeralda to send over some nautical charts. Oh, also, could I ask you one more thing?”

“Hm?” Rafina’s eyebrows rose. “Sure. What is it?”

“About the Holy Eve Festival this coming winter...” Mia said nervously. “Could you, um...tell me in advance how to prepare for it and what I’ll need to do?”

Her question made Rafina beam.

“Gosh... There’s all this going on, and you’re still thinking about your duties as the student council president?”

“O-Of course! You entrusted me with the job, after all!” Mia smiled back, pretending that was what she’d meant all along.

# Chapter 5: Chicken Tactics

"In that case, do you still remember how last year's Holy Eve Festival went?" asked Rafina.

"I certainly do."

Mia nodded as she revisited her memories of the occasion.

The Holy Eve Festival was Saint-Noel's biggest annual event. Based on the story of the Holy Deity descending to the mortal realm and bestowing the light of hope upon man, the festival's purpose was to express that year's worth of gratitude for His Holiness. Held during the first week of the last month each year, it consisted of a solemn candlelight mass followed by a lively celebration. During the mass, everyone gathered at the altar, each holding a wooden lamp. A traditional list of hymns was sung before Rafina gave a sermon. At the end, everyone would go outside and throw their lamps onto a bonfire, causing it to grow from an ember to a great, blazing flame. The ritual represented the light of hope from God illuminating the earth.

After that, the party began, and the festivities would continue throughout the night. The event was not limited in scope to the academy either; it spanned the entirety of the island, and students would spill into the town in roving bands spreading verve and merriment. The previous year, Mia and her friends had enjoyed a lengthy vendor stall browsing trip before retiring to Chloe's room and chatting the night away.

...In case anyone is wondering how the festival had gone for past-timeline Mia, it went about as badly as you'd expect. She sat in her room waiting for Sion to come and ask her out. Esmeralda dropped by with a bunch of friends during the party and invited her to join them, but she declined, figuring she couldn't afford to leave in case Sion showed up while she was gone. Mind you, she wasn't waiting for a specific time; no promises had been made whatsoever. She simply waited, and waited...and the next thing she knew, she'd woken to the sound of chirping birds.

Yes, it was one of *those* episodes.

Her lonesome memories of the event, however, ended up serving as juxtapositional fuel for last year's festival, greatly enhancing an already-enjoyable experience and turning it into a night she'd remember for the rest of her life.

"I see," said Rafina. "You're familiar with the general flow of the festival, yes? The student council's responsibilities lie mainly in the second half, during the party. There will be lots of traffic in and out of the academy during that time. Merchants, for example, who normally are not allowed in will be granted passage, and they'll need to be inspected beforehand. Security routines will need to be modified as well. With that said, the student council won't be micromanaging all of that. Rather, we'll be receiving reports from the people in charge of the various functions and it's our job to check those and make sure there are no deficiencies or issues."

"Hmm... It sounds like there's lots of work to do in advance. What about the day of?"

"The festival proper is actually a pretty light day for the student council. There won't be much work to do. Part of the planning we do beforehand is to put systems in place that allow on-site staff to operate flexibly without needing to report in for every little issue."

*Mmm... That does make sense. After all, Miss Rafina can't move around freely that day.*

As the daughter of Duke Belluga, Rafina was also a saint of the Central Orthodox Church. On the day of the Holy Eve Festival, she acted as the academy's chaplain. The role kept her very busy, requiring her to attend the candlelight mass, then going from guest to guest greeting and speaking with them. That was why systems had to be preemptively designed so that the festival could continue operating even in her absence.

"I know it sounds quite overwhelming, but it's a yearly event, and both the head of security and the chief butler who handles operations are familiar with how things are run. I suspect it won't be as onerous a task as it might sound," said Rafina with a gentle, reassuring smile.

Mia, of course, did not find this comment particularly comforting. If anything, it made her even more nervous, since having little to no work on the day of the festival meant that...

*There's basically nothing stopping me from going out and leaving the island.*

It'd be better if she'd been told that she had to run a marathon around the academy putting out operational fires, or that she had to stay cooped up in the student council office to deal with a steady stream of work. That would make it all but impossible to sneak off and get herself attacked by bandits. The prospect of persuading Rafina and the rest of the members to let her abandon a pile of work and leave the island on her own was pretty much unthinkable. Being able to wander around freely greatly lowered the hurdle to exiting the island, adding a great deal of ominous legitimacy to the Chronicles' prophecy.

*Oh, but then again, the me in the Chronicles didn't know I'd be killed if I left the island, so maybe at the time, I just felt like getting some fresh air and didn't give it much thought...*

She tried to imagine herself deciding to go for a long ride on a whim and carelessly strolling off the island with a horse. She succeeded.

*Okay, yes, I can totally see myself doing that.*

She pondered the implications of this thought. For example, all the work involved in the festival's prior preparation might have left her feeling pent-up. Maybe she was seeking an outlet for her frustrations, hoping to let off some steam by going for a lengthy gallop. Naturally, with the island occupied by the festivities, any horse riding would have to take place somewhere else; she'd have to leave the island. The more she considered this scenario, the more its likelihood seemed alarmingly high.

*In that case though, the solution is simple. No matter how busy I get, even if I feel cooped up and frustrated, I just have to make sure I don't do the stupid thing and leave Saint-Noel. That's it. I might just stay in my room the entire time. I could even host some sort of student council appreciation party in the office and spend the whole night partying there... Huh, I like the sound of that. Maybe the party could involve some mushroom stew...*

Though her mind found this arrangement entirely reasonable, her stomach seemed unconvinced, and something in it continued to flutter. It bothered her, and for some reason, she couldn't get it to go away.

*A-Anyway, until the day arrives, I should use this time to do whatever I can to prepare. That, at least, is something useful that I know I can do!*

Where carelessness goes, death follows close behind. So Mia was going to give both a wide berth by never letting down her guard. That was how she planned to fight this battle—avoid her enemy like the plague. As the

saying goes, when a chicken, do as the chickens do: employ Chicken Tactics.

# Chapter 6: A Challenge from the Fair Daughter of the Red Moon

Mia wasted no time putting her plan into action. She immediately dialed up the intensity of her riding practice. The next day, and every single day after that, she made a beeline for the riding grounds after class, whereupon she'd practice until nightfall. Her body ached all over as a result, but she wasn't at leisure to care.

"Hey, miss, you're here today too?"

As she approached the stable, Lin Malong came out and greeted her with a grimace.

"Really putting your back into it, aren't you? I think you've been here more often than even the princes lately."

"Oh, please. That's not true," she replied as she glanced at increasingly-familiar figures of her equine friends.

Saint-Noel's stable housed about twenty horses. Mia's favorite happened to be a white one with a gentle disposition. It was a good horse that even relative amateurs could ride well, and she was particularly fond of its beautiful hair.

"I mean, I can't fault you for practicing more, but... Hm? Hey, miss, is this about that thing coming up—"

"Excuse me."

Malong was cut off by the assertive voice of another girl.

"Ah, that must be..."

Mia recognized the voice. She turned in its direction.

"Greetings, Your Highness." Ruby Etoile Redmoon respectfully bowed her head, short red hair fluttering gently with the motion.

"My, Ruby... What brings you here?" Mia cocked a brow at her. The two of them were certainly acquainted. As princess, she had no shortage of opportunities to visit the Four Dukes at their residences, and while Ruby had always been a genial host when she'd shown up...

*We haven't exactly* talked*... Not as friends, at least. I can't really say we're all that close.*

Consequently, Mia's impression of Ruby was...neither good nor bad. In fact, she didn't have much of an impression of the girl at all. As for the Redmoons as a whole, their reluctance to provide military assistance in the previous timeline certainly soured her opinion of them a tad.

*Admittedly, it was sort of an "every noble for himself" situation back then. Everyone was desperately trying to protect their own domain. Still, the Redmoons are known for having a powerful private army. If they'd committed those soldiers to the conflict, the war might have ended differently... Oh, but then again, by that time, the enemy already had Sion and murder-machine Dion on their side. I can't imagine Redmoon reinforcements making much of a difference when up against people like them...*

She was so absorbed in her thoughts that she almost missed what Ruby said next.

"As a matter of fact, I've come to challenge Your Highness to a duel."

"...A duel? What?"

With an even smile, Ruby walked toward the horse stalls.

"Rumor says that you've been rather *enthusiastic* in your riding practice lately," she said as she patted a horse on its muzzle. The motion was easy and practiced, suggesting a deep familiarity with the creatures.

Mia remembered that she'd heard the House of Redmoon made their daughters study swordsmanship and horsemanship. She nodded in response to the question.

"Well, I suppose you could say that. What about it?"

"I assume that means you're going to enter the Horsemanship Tournament in the fall?"

"...The what?"

Mia tilted her head. "Horsemanship Tournament" was not a pair of words that sounded particularly familiar. She vaguely recalled that Abel and Sion might have alluded to such an event at some point and indicated their intention to participate. That must be why they'd been coming here as frequently as she had lately. Of course, having had so much on her mind, she'd paid no attention to the matter and had no plans to take part.

"Oh! I knew it! I figured that was why you've been practicing so much

recently," exclaimed a pleased Malong.

*Okay, hold on, people. I haven't agreed to anything yet.*

Before she could give voice to this thought, Ruby declared, "I formally challenge Your Highness to duel me in the speedriding event of the tournament." An incendiary smile flashed across her calm expression before she took a knee. "Will you accept?"

And so the challenge was officially made. Mia stared at the kneeling Ruby.

*There is...literally not a single reason for me to accept this "duel," is there?*

She felt a profound desire to decline and shoo the girl away so she could get on with her business. Mia had no obligation to duel people just because they challenged her. While she did appreciate Ruby's straightforwardness—this certainly beat Esmeralda's behind-your-back nonsense—the list of problems she had to deal with was long enough; she wasn't minded to add another one.

*Besides, it's obvious that there's more to this than just a simple challenge...*

If Ruby only wanted to see who was better at horseback riding, all she'd have to do was enter the Horsemanship Tournament. Since she was under the impression that Mia was going to compete as well, they'd naturally have to race each other that way. Instead, she'd come here and formally challenged Mia to a duel. The "duel" part was what made her wrinkle her nose. There was something very fishy about that word.

Mia's nose was promptly proved correct.

"I request that should I win this duel, I am permitted to take one of your soldiers for myself."

"Ah, right. You Redmoons and your headhunting. You've always got your eyes on good soldiers..." muttered Mia, feeling like a nagging question had been answered.

With close ties to the Ebony Moon Ministry, which governed military affairs, the House of Redmoon was always focused on strengthening its private army. They spared no effort or expense, recruiting promising soldiers from far and wide, both at home and abroad. So persistent were they in this behavior that it was widely known and even had a name, "Redmoon Headhunting."

*Too bad for you though. I have no reason to accept your challenge—*

"Well, miss? What're you waiting for? It's an honorable duel, fair and square. When someone respectfully challenges you like that, no ruler worth their salt can possibly decline, right?"

"...Eh?"

She stared at Malong, who grinned with the look of someone who didn't have a shred of doubt that she'd say yes.

"Uh... But... Huh?"

"Ah, don't worry about it. The horsemanship club's got your back. I'm sure Abel will be there to cheer you on too."

His grin widened, and Mia was suddenly seized by a familiar sense of helplessness.

*I... I know what this is!* She stood there dumbfounded, sensing an invisible current surging toward her, about to sweep her up in its flow. *Th-This is one of* those *situations! Where I don't get to say no! Ugh, here we go again...*

Reflecting on her past mistakes had led her to constantly scrutinize the people she considered important to her so she could analyze them. Based on her understanding, this senior classmate of hers named Lin Malong had a serious soft spot for anyone who liked horses. Which made him super susceptible to manipulation! Furthermore, she'd noticed him looking fondly at Ruby when she gently stroked the horse's muzzle. That had hit him right in his horse-loving heart! He also had a frank personality with a bit of a chivalrous lean, so stuff like honorable duels and formal challenges were exactly the kind of things that made his eyes sparkle. Therefore, walking away from Ruby's challenge right now would undoubtedly dent his impression of Mia. When it came to riding horses, his advice was always useful, which made it extremely valuable for her practice. Indispensable, even, considering the effectiveness of her practice might spell the difference between survival and doom. She'd prefer to stay on his good side as much as possible. Moreover, he was also something of an older brother to Abel. If she wanted to flirt with Abel to her heart's content, then Malong's unqualified blessing was nothing short of necessary!

She proceeded to enter a period of silent contemplation, during which she carefully gauged the risks and rewards.

*Okay, let's figure this out. If I decline the challenge, then I won't risk*

*losing my soldiers, but this comes at the cost of negatively affecting my friendship with Malong. I'd prefer to avoid that if possible. So what happens if I accept?*

Should she win the duel, she would of course keep her soldiers. On top of that, she would probably gain some yet-to-be-determined reward as her part of the deal. For example, she could request to pull over some soldiers from Redmoon's private army for her own purposes. But what if she lost?

*Chances are, the soldier Ruby's got her eyes on is Dion. I think that much is obvious...*

She got a brief mental image of a knight with a vicious smile, followed by him easily cutting through a spear of steel. The man went around calling himself "The Empire's Finest," and he had the skills to back it up. It was hardly surprising that the Redmoons would want him for their army.

"Hmm... You know, honestly, if it's Dion, I think I might actually..." she murmured, ruminating on how she felt about the knight.

He *did* chop her head off. Of course, she couldn't be sure whether he'd agree to being poached by Redmoon, but even if he did, she didn't think she'd lose much sleep over it. Something still bothered her though. The logic seemed sound, but she had a nagging feeling she was forgetting something...as if losing this particular knight would be a devastating blow to her.

*Mmm, on second thought, I guess he* did *save my life a couple times... If one head chop is made up for by one life save, then he has definitely earned more than his fair share of redemption... Now that I think about it, he might actually be sort of a...pretty loyal subject? But ugh, I just can't stand having him stand near me with a sword... It feels like he might chop my head off at any moment. So stressful...*

As she continued deliberating, muttering her thoughts under her breath, Ruby frowned.

"Huh? Dion? Who's that?"

She crossed her arms and pursed her lips for a moment. Then she lightly pounded her palm with her fist as the name finally rang a bell.

"Oh, I remember there was some guy by that name. I heard he was a pretty skilled knight... Something about being the empire's finest? Pretty famous fellow, I guess. But..." She narrowed her eyes at Mia. "Unfortunately, that's not who I'm after."

Like a seasoned warrior standing in the ring, she fixed Mia with a fierce look and...

“I mean, he’s...”

With unabashed confidence, said...

“Sort of short, isn’t he?”

“Uh...”

Mia summoned an image of Dion in her mind.

“Not...really? He’s...on the taller side compared to most men, I’m pretty sure?”

“Tsk tsk tsk. Oh, Your Highness, you clearly don’t understand. Knights, you see, have to be *bigger*. Strong *and* large. The bigger the man, the bigger his heart. The size of their body is the size of their soul. It’s not enough to be strong. They have to be *big*!”

Thus declared Ruby Etoile Redmoon. The fair daughter of the Duke of Redmoon, who held immense sway over the imperial army...

“*They have to be big!*”

...Was known to be mad for muscles and harbored an unparalleled love of big men.

# Chapter 7: Princess Mia...Picks Up the Gauntlet!

"...Uh, right. Big. Of course," Mia muttered, slowly recalling that she had indeed heard about Ruby and her *particular* interests.

*Yes, I remember now. So, she's into big men, huh. In that case...*

She went over the members of the Princess Guard in her head, looking for someone who might fit the bill.

"Oh... Are you talking about Vanos?"

The mere mention of the man's name seemed to almost make Ruby swoon, and she nodded before answering in an enamored drawl.

"Yes, him... He's the one I want. Oh, if I could have him lead the Redmoon private army, I'd..."

*B-But he's the closest thing Dion has to a conscience! You can't have him! He's the only one who can keep that crazy man from turning into some sort of serial decapitator! If I lose him, I... I don't think I'll ever sleep soundly again! No way! That is out of the question!*

If she were to participate in this duel, what could she possibly demand as reward for winning that would be worth the risk of losing Vanos? A lengthy period of contemplation produced no satisfactory option, and her inner scale of judgment promptly tilted toward the side of declining the challenge.

*Hnnngh... B-But I need to stay on Malong's good side... What do I do? Ideas... I need ideas...*

As the oncoming boulder steadily forced her backward toward a very hard place, her brain went into desperation-induced overdrive. Though her period of intense thought was short—the span of a few blinks at most—in that time, the Great Sage in her managed to come to a crucial realization. Duels, by their very nature, could not function without a certain condition being met. This condition was requisite to all competitive arrangements that involved wagers. Indeed, she'd happened upon the ultimate truth of "equal

stakes." There could be no legitimacy to a contest unless all players were putting something of equivalent value on the line. After all, nobody was going to bet their life when the opponent had pushed only a few measly coins into the pool. If people were risking their lives, then the reward for victory had to be worth their lives. Or, perhaps, even more.

Mia let out an exuberant laugh. Having understood this fundamental truth, the rest was simple; all she had to do was make her brilliant escape.

*I don't have to decline this challenge... I just have to make* her *take it back! Oho ho, you'd better brace yourself, because I'm about to knock your lights out!*

She quickly put together an attack plan and launched her rhetorical offensive.

"The duel itself, I don't mind accepting...but what would happen if I were to win?"

"I'd give you whatever it is that you desire, of course."

Mia had to stop an evil grin from spreading across her lips. Maintaining a serious expression, she fixed Ruby with a solemn gaze and said, "Very well... In that case, I desire...your sword."

"...Huh?" Ruby blinked, taken aback. "What...might you mean by that?"

"I mean exactly what I said. The House of Redmoon is a military family. All who are born there, no matter boy or girl, are trained in the use of the sword. I believe I'm correct in assuming that the sword is a symbol of great pride for your family, yes? It's something that you value above all else."

"So what you're saying is, if I lose, you're going to make me...give up my sword."

Ruby prided herself on her sword. In asking for it, Mia was forcing her to put her most treasured possession on the line.

*Mmm hm hm. Take that! You Redmoons sure make a lot of noise about your headhunting, but at the end of the day, I bet it's just a hobby for you. You're just collectors looking for more trophies to put on your shelf. Challenging me was probably just the same. You came here looking for some easy sport.*

She analyzed the situation in a calm manner. This whole thing was actually sort of absurd to begin with. No daughter of an esteemed duke in her right mind would brazenly and publicly challenge the princess of her empire to a duel. It simply wasn't done, because the emperor—for now, at

least—held immense sway in Tearmoon and his authority was still absolute. There was no way Ruby would challenge her to a serious, swear-upon-my-honor duel. Given that, what she meant by "duel" required some reinterpretation.

*If it's not a serious duel she's after, then this is just a game. She's just playing around for fun.*

If so, then this was nothing more than a casual diversion Ruby insisted on calling a duel for effect. In fact, the more Mia thought about it, the more sense it made. Ruby had asked for Vanos. Sure, the man was very important to Mia, but objectively, he was only a simple soldier with nothing to his name. For the Four Dukes, a contest over the treatment of a mere commoner couldn't be anything more than minor entertainment. The stakes weren't even that high. She hadn't asked for anyone to risk their lives. All that would happen was a reassignment of his post from the imperial army to the duke's private army. It was literally just a job shuffle.

*Chances are, she got it into her head that I'm entering the Horsemanship Tournament and figured coming to mess with me a bit would be a fun way to kill some time.*

To Ruby, her sword meant a great deal. She valued it as much as her own life. Therefore, if Mia asked her to wager her sword, it would be the same as her risking her life. And for what? A mere game? She'd have no choice but to back down.

And there was more!

"I've made my stance clear. Take it however you want. Just keep in mind that all my soldiers, without exception, are my loyal subjects, and I value each and every one of them. To be gambling with them... *Wagering* them like mere prizes... The mere thought offends me to no end. Should you insist on claiming one of them in this manner, you'd best be prepared to risk something of equal value," said Mia in an attempt to preemptively ward off any claims that she was being ridiculous in her demands.

After all, "Are you out of your mind? You can't ask someone to do that over a damn game!" would technically have been a legitimate argument. By declaring that Vanos was extremely valuable to her, she could then demand something of comparable significance. In essence, she was trying to make her opponent back down by threatening her with the "This isn't just a game for me, buddy" card.

*Hah! So, do you have the guts to risk something so precious to you just to get one soldier? Go ahead. Try it. I dare you.*

Figuring she'd just executed what would one day be known as a "mic drop," she basked in the moment, feeling supremely satisfied with herself and let out a smug breath of triumph.

Which was promptly answered.

"...So be it."

"...Eh?"

Ruby stared straight into her eyes.

"You're right... My sword is my pride. Its weight befits my conviction." Her expression hardened with determination. A warrior's smile crept across her lips. "A suitable wager for a duel of this caliber. So be it, Your Highness. I see your resolve, and I'll gladly match it with my own."

*Huh?! I'm sorry, you'll* what*?! Flippin' moons, what is* wrong *with you?! I know you're into large men, but get ahold of yourself!*

Mia had tragically misread her opponent. Never could she have imagined...that which drove Ruby was no mere collector's craving. Unlike the King of Remno, it did not stem from an inclination or hobby. Hers was a much deeper emotion. Much purer. Like a blade of flame, it burned with an intensity that seared her very soul, whetting a resolve so sharp it threatened to rend her heart in two.

"It's settled then. A duel, open and honest, fair and square. See you on your horse, Your Highness."

With that, Ruby Etoile Redmoon lowered her head in a deep bow before turning and departing with long, graceful, almost masculine strides.

"...Eh?"

That left Mia with no choice but to watch her retreating form with a blank, dumbfounded stare.

*H-How did it come to this?!*

After spending some time in a baffled daze, Mia's scattered wits slowly coalesced, restoring enough mental faculties for her to panic.

*Y-You know, now that I think about it...the Yellowmoons are suspicious, sure, but it's not like I can trust the Duke of Redmoon either...*

There was no guarantee that only one of the four houses were connected to the Chaos Serpents. In the future that Bel was from, the Four Dukes had fought each other two-on-two.

*It's entirely possible that the Redmoons are colluding with the Serpents and they're trying to cripple my ability to fight back. If I lose Vanos now, it'll not only put a huge dent in the strength of my forces, but I'll also lose my Dion moderator.*

She groaned in dismay. And pain. Mostly pain actually, considering she was pressing her hands to her temples, and groaned a second time.

"Oooh, my head hurts... Ugh, how did it come to this..."

"Ha ha ha. Good show, miss. That girl sure had some mettle, but you're no slouch yourself. Really told it to her there, didn't you?" Malong, who'd been watching the exchange, let out a rolling bout of laughter. "Well, the horsemanship club's got your back, so go out there and break a leg."

*Ooooh, is this funny to you, Malong? Because it's not funny to me! And I think I might actually break a leg out there! Hmph, he clearly thinks this isn't his problem...*

Unfazed by her scowl, he crossed his arms.

"That said, if it's speedriding you're competing in, you'll need to learn to ride moonhares."

"...'Moonhares'? What are those?"

"A breed of horse. Just like the name suggests, they're said to be as fast as the rabbit on the moon. Most of the famous knights you hear about in history books rode them. In fact, whenever people mention fast horses, they're usually talking about moonhares. We have two in our stable, though one's expecting and can't really move. As for the other one..." He trailed off before adding with a mischievous grin, "I think you'll get along just fine."

"Oh? And why is that?"

"He's no stranger to you, after all. The other moonhare we have is that horse that sneezed on you."

She was reminded of that rather unpleasant event that occurred the day

of the dance party for new students.

"Oh... *That* horse..."

With a strained smile, she glanced toward the stalls.

# Chapter 8: Mia the Acrobat

"Hmmm."

Malong led a horse to Mia. She gave it a good look over.

"So this is a moonhare... What's its name?"

"His name's Kuolan. Means 'wild tempest.'"

"Wild tempest... What a fierce name," she said, gazing at it.

Kuolan gazed back at her, snorted, then peeled its big horsey lips back into a grin.

"...Was that a laugh? Did this horse just laugh at me?"

"Ha ha ha, gotta say, I've been around a whole lot of horses, but I haven't ever heard any of them laugh," said Malong with a wry shrug.

"I-I see. I suppose that's true. But for some reason, I get the feeling he's making fun of me... Maybe it's just me..." she muttered as she continued to study it.

At a glance it looked the same as any ordinary horse. It was of average size and did not possess horns or wings. Everything about it was very...mundanely equine.

"Hmm... I guess you can't tell what a horse is made of just by looking. You have to ride them— Huh." She paused as a thought occurred to her. "That reminds me, I don't believe I've ever ridden this horse..."

She gave her head a puzzled tilt, prompting a roguish grin from Malong.

"I imagine you haven't. After all, this horse packs some serious speed. Letting an inexperienced student ride him is just asking for an accident to happen."

"Huh! You don't say!"

Mia regarded the moonhare Kuolan anew.

*I get it... So what Malong is implying is that he deems me capable now of riding this horse.*

Her face was already halfway to a smug grin when Malong added, "You, I figure, look sturdy enough to take a fall or two without much trouble."

"...Hm? How odd. I'm pretty sure that was a compliment, so why don't I

feel very complimented?"

"Ha ha ha, anyway. Jokes aside, how about it? Feel like taking this good boy for a spin?"

"Yes, I suppose I should. It's probably a good idea to get accustomed to riding him..."

Despite Malong's double-edged compliment, Mia was actually rather confident in herself. She'd been practicing harder than ever.

*Oho ho, do your worst, Moonhare. Then watch in awe as I handle you with the utmost grace.*

With a haughty huff, she leapt onto the horse, her hair fluttering majestically in the wind as the pair galloped into the distance.

...That was how she imagined it happening, at least. Reality was a lot less flattering.

*How strange... This isn't what I envisioned at all. How did I end up in this position?*

She sat on Kuolan's back, fit snugly between its neck and...

"Hold on tight, miss. Don't let go, or you might fall."

...Malong, whose larger frame cradled her from behind.

*H-He's treating me like a child!*

Feeling the need to protest this unflattering development, she said, "Um, Malong? I don't mind riding tandem but, uh, when I rode with Abel last time, it was more like...I sat in the back and sort of held onto him in the front."

"Yeah, this is my clan's riding style, actually. Normally, it's easier to stay balanced if you have the less experienced rider sit in the front."

"Oh? Is that so? Huh... I had no idea."

Having been under the impression that the tandem style she'd employed with Abel was the norm, she tilted her head at this new piece of information. Malong smiled at her gesture.

"In our clan, everyone rides. The old, the young, the men, and the women. It's as natural to us as walking."

"My, then you could have told Abel properly before he took me riding, you meanie. Hmph..." she muttered with a pout.

*I knew it! I always thought it was weird how I managed to fall off. It was the riding style's fault!*

...And definitely not because she'd been too busy rubbernecking. Right. Of course. Let's just pretend that's true.

*Honestly, Malong can be so clueless sometimes. After all this time, he somehow managed to leave out such an important detail. Then again, considering how easily Ruby led him on back there, I guess I shouldn't be surprised.*

Mia's lips protruded even further. Her opinion of Malong fell by about one point.

"Ha ha ha, sorry. I figured you'd rather be in the back though. It seemed like the right spot for you. I mean, you're special to him, aren't you?"

He grinned implicatively.

"Hm? What do you mean?"

"Traditionally, when you ride tandem in that fashion, we call it 'couple's style.' It's how warriors ride when they're protecting their loved ones in battle. The name comes from a story about one of our ancestors, who was a great hero. It tells of him sitting in front of his wife, guarding her as he charged through hundreds of enemies. Ever since then, it's become something of a custom to assume that when a woman rides behind a man, she's his special someone." He winked conspicuously at her. "Perfect for you and Abel, don't you think?"

*Honestly, Malong can be so thoughtful sometimes! In fact, thanks to that riding style, I got to enjoy some quality romance time with Abel! It's great! I love it! Long live couple's style! And, I mean, he maybe likes Ruby a bit too much, but her showing up did get him to show me this moonhare horse, so it was ultimately a good thing. Ah, Malong, I knew you'd never let me down!*

Her opinion of Malong shot up by a hundred and twenty points! Mia had the mind of an acrobat, or rather, her mind *was* an acrobat, flipping and spinning however it liked.

"Gotta say though, I didn't think you'd actually fall. That gave me one hell of a scare. I guess I haven't apologized properly either, so let me do that now. Sorry."

"Oho ho, don't worry about it. I haven't let it bother me, so you shouldn't either. Besides, it's not like you to dwell. There's no need to apologize, so just take that thought and flip it out of your mind," she said, like a true master of mental somersaults.

Her previous grievances had already soared past her mental horizon and

stuck a landing on a thick mattress of discarded memories. They didn't have to try very hard. Again, having the horizon of her memories no more than a stone's throw away was one of Mia's few good points.

"Oh yeah? Ha ha, that's good to hear, miss. I see your heart is as big as ever."

Malong's appreciative compliment failed to reach its intended recipient, for Mia had already tuned him out.

*My, what a wonderful expression. Couple's style. Like,* married *couple... Abel and I, married... Oho ho... It's as if our lives became intertwined the moment we got on that horse together. What a lovely thought...*

With her brain stuck firmly in romantic daydream mode, her head was so filled with various permutations of "Abel's such a gentleman" and "the way he held me to break my fall was so dreamy" that it wasn't processing any auditory information. As a result, she failed to process the disquieting meaning of Malong's next comment.

"No couple's style this time though. If I let you sit in the back, you'll probably go flying straight off, and that won't be fun for anybody. Abel'd have my head if that happened," he said, the embedded warning lost on Mia. "All right. Hold on tight, okay? Make sure you don't get thrown off."

"Eh? U-Uh, of course. This will be a piece of cake. In fact, I bet I can handle this horse without you. It's time for me to demonstrate the results of all that practice I've been doing."

With that confident remark, they took off. Little did she know, she would soon become wind.

# Chapter 9: Princess Mia...Becomes Wind

“Eeeeeeeeeeeek!”

Mia’s shrill scream could be heard throughout the riding grounds. Air, relentless and powerful, slammed into her like a wall, threatening to flatten her body. It was like galloping into a hurricane!

Fortunately, Malong’s large frame was behind her, ensuring she did not become airborne. The cost of this safety was the sensation of being squashed into a thin paste between two massive slabs, one gaseous and the other pectoral. The constant gale sent her hair whirling wildly around in little hair tornadoes, she feared the strands would all come right off. She desperately clutched the reins, forced her body forward, and tensed, trying to stay seated on the horse.

The world around her sped past in fuzzy streaks, blurred by the tears in her eyes. Everything, from the fence around the grounds and the surrounding greenery to the people watching them, had been reduced to smears of color, each lasting only a brief second before leaving her view. She vaguely made out some fallen leaves twirling into the air in the distance. The next thing she knew, they’d raked through her hair with an alarming *shiiiick* and were gone. She’d heard the sound before. It was the same shrill noise made by the arrows the Lulu tribe had shot at her!

“Fwaaaaaaaah! Gyaaaaaaaaah!”

She screamed as she began to regret the comment she’d made a few minutes ago.

*Aaaah, why did I have to go and say something like that? Why...*

Going back a few minutes...

After arriving at the riding grounds, Mia promptly began her test ride on the moonhare with Malong. They circled the grounds twice, going faster than even that time Mia had urged her steed into an uncontrolled gallop. The sheer sense of speed was almost violent in its intensity, and it wasn’t long before she let out a muffled teary squeal.

Noticing her discomfort, Malong asked, “Well, that was a decent warm up. Wanna call it a day for now? There’s no rush after all. You can take your time getting used to it.”

With great effort, Mia craned her head toward him and smiled. It was, of course, a *very* strained smile.

*Warm up? You’re telling me this is just a warm up?* she thought, secretly terrified by the implications.

She should have listened to her inner chicken. If only she’d been honest and said she’d had enough for the day. She could have gotten away with just the warm up... But she hadn’t.

“H-Hah, I can handle this no problem. You said this was a warm up? Well, it had better be, because I’m just getting started.”

Her damn ego didn’t let her. Not after saying a whole lot of big words about how she could handle the horse even if Malong didn’t ride with her. It was too late to back down. Worse was the fact that her mouth just kept flapping.

“Th-This isn’t nearly as bad as I expected. Easy peasy. It seems like the speed of the moonhares is all talk,” she said boastfully before putting on a smug face and adding, “Well then. Now that I’ve seen what this horse can do, I think I’ll let you off the hook for today.”

She’d meant it as an excuse to call it quits and get herself off this four-legged speed demon, but before she could ask to end the ride, she noticed something strange. The horse’s ears were bent at a weird angle, almost as if it were listening in on their conversation. Moments after, Kuolan let out a rising whinny, the cry akin to how a rotating contraption might sound when picking up speed. Behind her, she heard Malong utter two very worrying sounds.

“Uh oh—”

Before she could ask for clarification, he shouted, “Hold on tight, miss! And don’t talk or you’ll bite your tongue!”

“...Eh?”

His warning coincided with a second, more powerful neigh. A split second later, Kuolan exploded into motion. Fast-moving air slammed into her eardrums with a deafening boom, and she became wind.

*You know, I really need to stop getting cocky. It’s definitely one of my*

*worse habits...*

Kuolan veered around a corner. The motion almost flung her straight off its back. She desperately fought to stay on, keeping her grip on the reins through pure will. With an intense effort, she managed to force her eyes open. The first thing to leap into view was Kuolan's face, which had been briefly craned in her direction to display the parting of its big, horsey lips in a wide grin.

*Th-This horse... Is he making fun of me right now?! Seriously?! I'm being mocked by a horse?!* Indignance flared up, suppressing her terror. Her eyes had the fiery glow of someone rising to meet a challenge. *All right, you stupid animal, if you think this is all it takes for me to admit defeat, then you are dead wrong. Compared to the guillotine, this... This is nothing! Having Dion out for your blood is way scarier! After going through that, I... I-I can... No, I can't! I'm sorry! I lied! Please stop! Eeeeek! Let me off! I can't handle this!*

Only after having far more than her fill of the experience of riding a moonhare did Mia's feet find steady ground again. Her trembling legs struggled to support her weight, and she staggered.

"Whoa, are you okay, miss?"

Malong rushed to give her a hand, only to be beaten to the punch.

"Careful, Mia. Watch your feet."

"That felt uncharacteristically reckless of you."

"...Eh?"

Finding a pair of arms supporting each of hers, she dazedly looked up to find the faces of a pair of princes.

"M-My... Abel and Sion... What are you two doing here?"

"Horse riding practice, of course...but since we found you speedriding, we decided to spectate," answered Sion in a casual tone.

"I'm glad we caught your moonhare debut," added Abel. "How was the ride? You look a little unsteady. Are you okay?"

She almost melted before his gentle smile, but forced her legs to remain solid matter and put on the bravest face she could muster.

"H-Hah, as if something like that could rattle me. I-It was a...t-total cakewalk."

She thanked the two princes for their aid. Then with slow, elegant steps, she strolled over to Kuolan and gently stroked the tip of its nose. As she did,

she whispered, “You were laughing at me back there, weren’t you? You’ve got some nerve, you stupid horse. Do you have any idea who I am— Hm?”

Kuolan took a big breath in, swiveled its head a little to point its muzzle at her head, and with a mighty *hack-a-pchoo*, unloaded the contents of its nose.

“Gyaaaah!”

A storm of air, snot, and drool swept past her, knocking her onto her rear. Dumbstruck, she looked up aghast at the horse, then down at herself to survey the aftermath of the sneeze. She could feel her hair stuck to her cheeks, covered in equine nose goo. Her shirt was wet and slimy. It was all very disgusting.

“Oh, just a heads up, miss. Kuolan can understand human words to a degree, so might be best to watch what you say around him. You don’t want him to think you’re a pushover.”

Almost in concert with Malong’s warning, Kuolan grinned and looked down its nose at Mia.

*He... He totally does! This damn horse thinks I’m a joke!*

# Chapter 10: Princess Mia...Will Not Rest Until She Has Her Revenge!

"...Ugh, what a terrible day."

With tired, squishy steps, Mia made her way to the communal baths. Anne walked alongside her.

"It'll be okay, milady. We'll get it washed off right away," said the maid in a comforting tone. "You'll be your usual beautiful self in no time!"

As she rolled up her sleeves, her eyes gained the fiery glow of someone rising to meet a challenge. Fortunately, Saint-Noel's communal baths were sourced from natural hot springs and always had plenty of water and could be used at any time.

"Hnnngh, I'm dripping with snot..."

Mia peeled off her wet clothes, but a disgusting stickiness lingered on her face and in her hair, dampening her mood. With an exceptionally long face, she stepped into the bathing room...

"Oh?"

Her curiosity was piqued by how the room smelled. Wafting among the steam was the fragrance of some sort of grass or herb. It was a pleasant, calming aroma that seemed perfect for lulling people to sleep.

"Mmm... It smells so nice."

She looked around, searching for the source of the new scent.

"Good day, Your Highness."

"Huh? Miss Mia? Why are you here?"

Voices sounded from the pool. As she squinted through the vapor, she noticed a pair of familiar figures.

"That's *my* question, Bel. And Citrina too. What are you two doing here?"

She eyed her granddaughter and her new friend.

*Hmm... It seems a little unusual to be taking a bath together at this time of day.*

With an eyebrow raised, Mia walked over to the washing area and sat down on one of the wooden stools. Anne immediately appeared and began rinsing her hair. The sensation of the maid's fingers running through her hair and scratching at her scalp was wonderful, and Mia closed her eyes to enjoy the process. She could gradually feel the usual silkiness of her hair return as water washed away the slime.

When Anne was almost finished with her hair, Mia spoke to Citrina.

"It's a rare sight to see you here. I thought Tearmoon nobles weren't very fond of the communal baths," she said, glancing in the girl's direction.

*You might think you've won me over, but I've got my eyes on you!*

Mia huffed out a pugnacious breath. The Yellowmoons were still high up on the potential enemy list, and Citrina was their Duke's daughter. There was no way she was going to let her guard down around them. She sharpened her gaze, ready to vigorously denounce any suspicious behavior she perceived.

Citrina sat on the edge of the pool, her slender limbs and dainty torso exuding an aura of elegance despite her youth. Clothed or not, she still looked like a doll, and one of exceptional quality at that. The skin on her delicate arms and legs was pallidly white. The girl, Mia thought, must have been telling the truth when she said she was born in poor health. She certainly looked weak.

*I'm pretty sure even I can take her in a fight...*

After giving her opponent the patented Mia once-over and analyzing her potential in battle, Mia was imbued with a strange confidence. Citrina, meanwhile, responded with a sweet smile.

"As a matter of fact, I was just telling Bel that we should ask Your Highness to join us."

"Oh? Join you here, you mean?"

"Yes. I know a little about herbs, so I asked Miss Rafina and received permission to add some scented ones to the bath," Citrina said, demonstratively cupping a handful of water from the pool.

"Huh, did you now...?"

It occurred to Mia that the herbs must be the source of the pleasant fragrance she'd noticed when entering the room. With her wash-and-rinse session completed, she got up from her seat and approached the pool. On closer inspection, she noticed a satchel of dried flowers bobbing on the

surface of the water.

"What kind of plant is this?"

"It's a type of herb called moonbead. It's said that moonbead is good for relieving muscle stiffness. Please, come in and see if it works for Your Highness."

Lured by Citrina's welcoming smile, Mia lowered herself into the water. As the warm fluid enveloped her body, she let out a sigh of relief.

"This...does feel very good. It's like the tension is just draining out of me. So nice and warm..."

Slowly, she sank lower and lower into the pool until only her head remained above water. With a lazy grunt, she stretched her limbs as far as they would go, feeling the heat seep into her pores from her toes to her neck. The "Oof..." she let out was, perhaps, a tad too guttural to be entirely appropriate for her regal image, but no one commented upon it.

Citrina slipped into the pool beside Mia.

"I heard from Bel that recently, Your Highness has been spending a lot of time practicing horseback riding, so I looked for ways to relieve fatigue. I hope it helps."

Faced with this exceedingly thoughtful gesture, Mia...

"My! That's so very kind of you!"

...Was moved to the core! She got so many warm fuzzies that she almost teared up. Mia was, in general, rather gullible and prone to liking anyone who showed an interest in bathing. Furthermore, the comfort of being in her natural habitat—the bathhouse—had made her drop her guard. These two factors combined had turned her into an affection point pinata, which Citrina had just smashed open by conveying her consideration through the medium of the bath, claiming all those precious affection points for herself. If she'd then presented some sort of bath-friendly sweet for Mia to enjoy, she'd probably be the official Princess's Soulmate by the time they left the bathhouse.

"I see that you've made a wonderful friend," said Mia, turning toward Bel.

The two traded smiles.

"Ehe he, I'm glad you think so, Miss Mia. I really like Rina too."

Grandmother and granddaughter proceeded to chuckle in concert, sharing a moment of familial harmony.

“Aaaah...this truly is some quality bathing...” remarked Mia.

She raised her right arm above the water, appreciating the way water droplets rolled off her smooth, unblemished skin. She cupped a handful of water and splashed it onto her face. The sensation of warmth permeating her cheeks was simply sublime. As a connoisseur of baths, Grandmother Mia preferred ones on the slightly hotter side. Those infused her body with enough heat for her to enjoy a lingering sensation of warmth for some time even after stepping outside.

“By the way, Your Highness,” Citrina said abruptly, “since you’re practicing so much, does that mean you’ll be entering the Horsemanship Tournament in the fall?”

“Ah, I suppose I can’t fault anyone for thinking that. The truth is that I never intended to do so, but with the way things are going, I think I might have to...” she answered, sighing as she recalled the day’s events.

“In that case, is it okay for Rina to go and watch you practice?”

“My, are you interested in horseback riding too, Citrina?” Mia’s look of surprise quickly changed into a smile. “By all means then. Come and take a look. The horses are quite adorable. Well, most of them, anyway...”

A vision of a certain grinning equine sneezer arose in her mind.

*I will never forgive that horse... Absolutely never! I’ll get you back for this, you smug jerk! Mark my words!*

She clenched her fist as she swore to even the score with the horse that had so wronged her. She would not rest until she’d had her revenge.

*Next time, I’m going to eat a whole carrot cake right in front of your face! We’ll see how you feel about that, you stupid horse!*

On an unrelated note, said carrot cake was, in fact, one of the vegetable desserts invented by Tearmoon’s head chef. He’d sent the recipe over, and it would soon be incorporated into the academy’s cafeteria menu.

# Chapter 11: Even If the Flames of Her Passion Burn to the Bone...

Ruby Etoile Redmoon was ten years old when she met the love of her life. As the daughter of one of the empire's Four Dukes, she enjoyed an unimaginably privileged upbringing as a Redmoon. Born with exceptional athleticism, she excelled in swordsmanship and horsemanship. Her skill with the sword eclipsed that of her three younger brothers, which delighted the Duke. Every so often, he'd joke about how instead of marrying her off, he'd rather make her his heir and adopt a son-in-law into the family. Those listening understood it to be the hyperbolic boasting of a proud father, but something about his tone always made it impossible for them to discard his comments entirely. She herself was well aware of her father's expectations. Though young, she strived earnestly to match and exceed them.

Born with all the makings of a hero, the world should have been her oyster. Her life would hit a turning point, however, the day she accompanied her father on a routine army inspection.

"There are lots of people here who look really strong, father."

"Ha ha ha, there certainly are. Take a good look at them. Doesn't it get you fired up to see these big men in all their powerful glory?"

Her father's interest in gathering quality soldiers was so intense that it had a nickname—Redmoon Headhunting. Like all good enthusiasts, when presented with the object of his fascination the Duke would be overcome with excitement like a boy with his favorite toy.

They toured the army until her father had to leave for a meeting with the military top brass.

"If you get bored, get them to give you a horse and take it for a ride," he said before departing.

Ruby took his advice and made her way to the riding grounds. Having accumulated no small amount of equestrian experience, the prospect of

being on horseback was nothing new. She didn't give it much thought, figuring she'd just ride around as usual and kill some time. However, there was an accident. The horse she was riding lost its cool all of a sudden and began running wild.

"H-Hey! You! S-Stop! You can't— I said stop!"

Trying to bring the rampaging horse to heel, she pulled on the reins with all her strength. The horse, startled by the sudden tug, reared violently.

"Ah—"

She felt herself go flying. The world spun on its axis. Sound vanished. Time seemed to slow to a crawl as the ground drew closer and closer. She closed her eyes tight and her body froze up. The swordmaster she trained with had taught her how to break a fall, but it all happened too fast. Too suddenly. She couldn't get her body to move the way she wanted. The only thing she could do was clench her teeth and wait for the pain that would inevitably assault her.

And then she stopped. Just...stopped, her body hanging motionless in midair.

"...Huh?"

Comprehension escaped her. She could but stare blankly at the unmoving ground, her body still stiff in preparation for impact.

"You okay, little lady?"

The deep, booming voice of a man entered her ears. Gingerly, she opened her eyes to discover...

*Wow... He's so big...*

...Vanos, his awkward smile clearly an endearing attempt to avoid scaring the girl he'd just saved from a bad fall.

She never forgot that day. The things she felt—the pounding of her heart and tightening of her chest—never left her. It could have been nothing special. Just a meaningless childhood crush, just as many girls her age would experience fleeting moments of romance that were a far cry from the real thing. An illusory taste of love. But for Ruby that feeling did not fade into a sepia-toned memory of childhood passion. It grew. It *glowed*. Like a piece of aureate treasure, its luster only intensifying with time.

*I...have to meet him again. See him. Talk to him. And then...*

Slowly, inconspicuously, that singular desire supplanted all others,

becoming the very purpose of her life. As she grew older and began to understand the inner workings of the military, she involved herself in the affairs of the Ebony Moon Ministry.

She had to know. The man who saved her that day... What was his name? Was he still alive? She searched the ministry's records for clues. Progress was slow. It took years, but she finally managed to discover the man's identity. He was the vice-captain of a hundred man squad, and his name was Vanos.

The hard part was done. Now that she knew who he was, there should be plenty of ways for her to make him her own. The simplest method would be to assign him to the Redmoon's private army as a supervisory officer. It wouldn't be hard to pressure the Ebony Moon Ministry into doing so. Knowing her father's penchant for headhunting, they wouldn't find it surprising if he were to show an interest in someone of Vanos's caliber. The proposal should pass with little resistance. Then she could take her time approaching him and building rapport. The profound disparity in social status between them would doubtlessly make for an arduous love. Their marriage would lie at the end of a path fraught with adversity. It didn't matter though. The flames of her passion burned so hot that she was ready to abandon her house and family if need be.

Ruby's love was superlative. In preference, yes—she liked big men, the bigger the better—but also in *quality*. Her love was a fiery one fueled by her very soul. Its heat poured outward in the form of her passionate personality and burned her to cinders within. For love, she would burn to the marrow of her bones.

For now her greatest wish was to have him somewhere close. Within arm's reach. But her plan did not come to fruition. Before she could act, he was poached by Princess Mia, who pulled him and his entire squad into the imperial guard. The squad had always carried itself as something of a private mercenary company. That, coupled with the fact that the princess already held great sway over its members, meant that even the Ebony Moon Ministry had no choice but to comply. In the end, Ruby was left with the broken fragments of a failed plan, having had the man of her dreams taken from her by Mia.

"Meddling in people's love affairs now, are we? It seems Her Highness can be quite the fifth wheel..." she spat bitterly at the sky.

Though she vented her frustrations, she did not dwell on them. The battle was still raging. For years she'd been fighting to win the man she treasured. She would not stop now. Surrender was not an option. Ever since Mia had enrolled at Saint-Noel, Ruby had been waiting and watching for an opportunity to present itself.

And when she deemed the time to be ripe she acted swiftly.

In truth, she wasn't sure if her challenge would work. Mia could simply refuse to duel her. The very thought of a Duke's daughter challenging a princess to a duel bordered on the absurd. Such a stunt would be unthinkable in Tearmoon. So she did it here, while they were at Saint-Noel Academy. Under the authority of the Central Orthodox Church and the governance of Saint Rafina, the academy was more tolerant of social transgressions. Being a place where youth congregated, trouble and conflict was almost a daily occurrence. It simply wasn't feasible to treat every squabble as a matter of interfamilial or international significance.

Furthermore, based on accounts from Esmeralda and Sapphias, Princess Mia's character had apparently undergone a metamorphosis in recent times, maturing into a person of forbearance who readily forgave minor affronts. In that case, there was a chance that she might accept Ruby's challenge.

Posing the challenge at the stables and selecting Lin Malong as the witness were both calculated maneuvers as well. Being on the taller side of things, Malong had caught Ruby's eye as well, and she'd studied his personality in advance. Challenging Mia at that specific location with him present was the best way to ensure the terms of the duel remained unchanged. Considering that Mia had apparently been undergoing intense training in preparation for the Horsemanship Tournament, she couldn't possibly look Malong in the eye and suggest dueling through some other method.

Thus Ruby succeeded in finalizing the duel on her terms. Competing through an event in the Horsemanship Tournament afforded her an overwhelming advantage. A passage from a treatise on tactics she'd heard in the past echoed in her mind.

*The tide of battle begins flowing long before it is fought. The act of crossing swords is simply a formality to confirm the result. It is in the previous stage where the actual outcome is decided.*

Therefore, the risk of losing was not worth considering in battle. No, it was more than that...

"It's *him* we're talking about. I'm trying to make him mine. I can hardly expect to do so without risking a limb or two. Or more. My own life? The survival of my house? I couldn't care less. All small prices to pay."

Even if she had no chance of winning, she'd still do it. And gladly, at that. What hurt the most wasn't losing. It was being denied the chance to fight. When the prize was the person she loved, nothing could be more painful than the inability to even make an attempt to win. The fiery desire that had burst to life that fateful moment still raged within, scorching her heart and soul to this day.

"Sir Vanos...I'll bring you to my side...one way or another..."

Ruby Etoile Redmoon, the proud daughter of the Duke of Redmoon, was an impassioned girl who lived and loved like a forest fire.

Meanwhile, Mia, who hadn't the slightest clue what was going on in Ruby's head...

"Oho ho, they finally made it. I have my carrot cake. Everything is going according to plan. Now I can make it watch me eat, and right in front of its face! Of course, this isn't about revenge or anything. That would be terribly petty of me. It's to improve my horsemanship...by teaching that horse to treat me with proper respect!"

She hummed gleefully to herself and made her way to the stables.

"Hm hmm, mmm hm hm... Ah, this is such a delicious cake," she said as she flaunted the pastry in front of her nemesis. "Just look at it. Doesn't it look tasty? Hm? Don't you want to have some? Well, you *can't*! Because it's all mine! And I'm going to eat it right here while you— Eeek?! Wai— N-No! Stop! I-It's mine! Give it— Aaaah! No! My cake!"

And so, Mia shared her carrot cake with Kuolan like a true friend, and the two got to know each other a little bit better. The end.

For her carrot cake revenge scheme, anyway.

# Chapter 12: The Pegasus Princess Struggles

“All right, Kuolan, let’s go,” said Mia after mounting the horse.

For the past few days, she’d been spending all her free time riding the moonhare, Kuolan. She gently stroked its neck, then gave the sides of its flank a light kick.

She’d been getting in a lot of real practice lately. After all, she’d considered horses to be her lifeline ever since she’d been trying to escape the guillotine timeline. Horsemanship was a skill she knew she absolutely could not afford to cut corners on. Her recognition of its vital importance, combined with her recent burst of concentrated, cram school-style training, allowed her to discover a fundamental truth.

“When it comes to horseback riding, at the end of the day, the most important thing is to match the horse’s rhythm. As if you’re trying to breathe together. It’s like how you have to step in time with your partner when dancing!”

The horse slowly shifted into a walk, and she continued to signal it through light taps. Right, left, right, left... At this point, it was important to tap out a steady rhythm that was easy for the horse to follow. A good rhythm made for a happy horse, and a happy horse made for a smooth ride. The same rule applied when speeding up. The crucial factor was to rebalance oneself in preparation for the faster gait and to match the horse’s pace while signaling it in time with one’s feet.

*The trick is to match the horse’s rhythm.*

As soon as she’d realized that, the rest of it had all clicked. Harmonizing with her partner... Moving together... Those were concepts she knew like the back of her hand. When dancing, she also had to move in time with the music while matching her partner’s steps and strides. Horseback riding and ballroom dancing were one and the same.

Now, for those of you who have—understandably, considering the

general trend of Mia's particularities—forgotten, you are hereby reminded that Mia was actually a good dancer. Masterful, even. As a result, she'd picked up horsemanship fairly easily. Basic riding was already no problem for her, and her skills were quickly moving from the realm of competent to impressive. So delighted was she by her own aptitude that it went straight to her head, causing her to entertain such thoughts as "I should totally start calling myself the Pegasus Princess."

"Hm, at this speed, it's sort of like triple time. If we go a bit faster, the gait turns into quadruple time. That means the timing for when I start signaling should be..." she murmured.

That's right. At last, Mia's <Dancing> skill had produced a bonus offshoot in her skill tree. She now had <Horse Riding> at the level of C-. Given this advancement, she understandably felt that mastery over riding moonhares was within her reach, but for some strange reason...

"Hnnngh... Why..."

She'd followed Malong's advice, keeping Kuolan at a slow walk, but she still couldn't help but let out a frustrated groan.

*The rhythm's off a little again. How come it changes every time I start hitting a good groove? I swear, this horse...*

Her irritation was justified. Whenever she settled into a comfortable rhythm, signaling as necessary in time with their gait, the horse would change its tempo. And not all at once either, which was the worst part. It would happen subtly, a quarter beat every few seconds, until their relative rhythms were completely out of time. There was something uncannily unpleasant, almost insidious, about the slow onset, as if she were experiencing a gradual descent into syncopated madness.

The mismatches were still manageable at a walking pace, but they would be a much bigger problem when they sped up to a trot, during which the horse's body would bob more violently up and down, forcing the rider to employ a technique knowing as posting that involved alternating between standing and sitting in order to soften the impact. When attempting to post this trot, she'd repeatedly fail to match Kuolan's rhythm, causing its back to slam painfully into her rear over and over.

"Ooooh, my butt hurts so much... You're doing this on purpose, aren't you? I know you are!"

As if it had understood her complaint, Kuolan promptly craned its head

toward her and neighed, peeling its lips back in the process.

"Y-You stupid... Oh, I know what this is. This is payback for taunting you with that carrot cake yesterday, isn't it? But you ended up eating a good half of it anyway!"

Gnashing her teeth in anger, she dismounted.

*Ugh, I can't work with this horse. We have zero chemistry. No, we have* negative *chemistry. How come I'm stuck with this thing? I like the obedient ones so much better. They're so docile and adorable...*

It bears mentioning that almost every competitor in the Horsemanship Tournament would be bringing their own horse from home. Most of those participating in the speedriding event would, of course, be riding moonhares, and Ruby was no exception.

*Grr... I can't believe* this thing *is the only available moonhare the horsemanship club has.*

She couldn't ask for a horse to be sent from Tearmoon either, having attempted this very request—and for a regular, garden-variety horse at that—when she'd first joined the club only for a hysterically worried emperor to butt in, screaming about how "It'd be a national tragedy if she got on such a big horse and accidentally fell off!" In the end, they'd sent her a tiny little pony. Very safe, but also very disappointing.

*What should I do... At this rate, I'll be lucky if I don't make a complete fool out of myself, never mind winning the duel...*

Just as she crossed her arms and began considering her options, a voice interrupted her thoughts.

"Hey, Mia. How's it going?"

She looked up to find a horse clopping toward her. Atop it sat Abel.

"My, Abel. You're practicing today too?"

"Of course. I want to win."

He, along with Sion, would be competing in the horseback swordsmanship category.

"I see. Well, I suppose I should expect nothing less of you, Abel. You seem very comfortable on that horse of yours. It's very impressive."

"Is it? You're no slouch yourself, in my opinion."

"*I'm* certainly no slouch, but this horse— Eek!"

Something thumped her from behind, and she almost fell over.

"What the—?!"

She spun around to discover Kuolan's muzzle occupying the space where her back had been.

*Flippin' moons! This horse! He* has *to be messing with me!*

She glared. Abel regarded it too, albeit with a more thoughtful expression.

"Hmm... I wonder if he doesn't like how the two of us are together so often. Maybe he's jealous." He scratched his chin. "I think he likes you, Mia."

"He *likes* me? Huh..."

She eyed the horse again, this time with more curiosity.

*He might have a point... I do remember Anne telling me about how when a boy likes a girl, he acts mean to her because he's trying to get her attention.*

With pursed lips, she studied Kuolan, who responded with its characteristic grin. It was a very aggravating gesture, what with the way it pulled back its lips to reveal its big horse teeth.

"So *that's* how it is, huh. I see what's going on now. You— Hm?"

She suddenly noticed that Kuolan's nostrils were twitching. Based on past experience, this kind of phenomenon was usually followed by...

"Oh you'd better not— Wait, let me back away— Gyaaaah!"

There was a mighty *hack-a-pchoo*, followed by the sound of fluid hitting fabric. Struck by a sneeze powerful enough to raise a storm warning, Mia toppled backward onto her already-bruised buttocks.

# Chapter 13: Princess Mia...Cheers! For the Horse, That Is...

“Nope! That’s it! That was the final straw! I’m done!” exclaimed a livid Mia as she led Kuolan none-too-gently back to the stables.

She’d wiped off as much as she could with a cloth, but her hair remained coated by a layer of stuff. *Icky* stuff...

“Ugh, I need a bath, pronto... But before that, I have to get Malong to find me a different horse!”

With her mind made up, she headed toward the special stable where Malong was supposed to be. Upon arriving, however, she found it empty.

“Huh? That’s strange...”

It was entirely empty, devoid of man and horses.

“This is my first time coming in here...” she murmured as she looked around.

When she walked in further, she realized that she’d been mistaken. There was a horse in there that had been hidden from view. It stood calmly toward the back of the building.

“My... What a gorgeous horse...”

Its beauty captivated her. Pure white hair adorned its form, and it exuded the regal aura of a queen. It turned and looked straight at her.

“You’re...”

“That’s Kayou. She’s a moonhare like Kuolan.”

Malong appeared behind her holding a massive pitchfork, suggesting the reason for his absence had been moving around hay for the horses.

“A moonhare... Oh, I do remember you saying there’s a horse that can’t be ridden because it’s about to give birth.”

On closer inspection, the horse’s body did seem rounder than usual.

“She’s so beautiful...”

She smiled at Kayou, who quietly studied her with a tender look in its eyes.

“She has such gentle eyes...”

“She sure does. Definitely one of the tamer moonhares. I’d have you ride her, but she can’t run right now.”

“Ah, what a terrible shame...” she said, musing on the newfound possibilities.

*It won’t be ready in time for the Horsemanship Tournament, but what about later? Like the winter?*

On the night of the Holy Eve Festival, Mia was prophesied to have gone out on a long ride, during which she was killed by bandits. What if the horse she’d ridden was replaced by a faster one like a moonhare? Maybe she could have survived the encounter. Kayou seemed like the kind of horse who’d listen so they could cooperate and run as one. Unlike that other stupid horse...

With glowing, expectant eyes, Mia looked at Malong.

“By the way, just out of curiosity... When exactly is this horse going to give birth? And when will she be able to run?”

“Well, let’s see. I’d give her maybe another ten days. Once she gives birth, she can start running around on her own almost immediately, but if you want her to go at full speed while carrying a rider... Eh, another week should be fine.”

“So a little more than two weeks? In that case...”

It’d be ready long before winter came. She’d have plenty of time until the Holy Eve Festival began. With renewed interest, she looked Kayou over. It kept studying her with those beautiful eyes that sparkled with intelligence.

*She’s so different it’s almost funny. On the one hand, there’s Kuolan and his stupid face, and on the other, there’s Kayou. They do say moonhares are supposed to be really smart horses. Seeing this one, I totally believe it. That stupid Kuolan must be the odd one out. Maybe he was dropped on his head as a foal or something,* she thought, appreciating the intelligent majesty of the ivory beast. *And if she’s smart, then that must mean she’ll remember when someone does something nice for her. Kuolan might be annoying and clueless, but I bet Kayou will know how to reciprocate. Which means...*

Mia’s instincts were screaming at her to get on this horse’s good side. To oblige it with so many favors it’d have no choice but to like her! With a firm nod, she turned to Malong.

“Excuse me, Malong, but I’d like to help you take care of this horse. Would that be okay?”

“Hm? Uh, I mean, sure, I guess? What kind of help are we talking about?”

“Tidying up the stable, washing the horse so she stays nice and clean, stuff like that.”

Though they belonged to the horsemanship club, members like Mia did not actually look after the horses. That was handled by academy staff. Being of high birth, they only needed to concern themselves with pursuits that befit their status, like the honing of their riding technique.

Malong, having hailed from the Equestrian Kingdom, considered the care of horses to be part and parcel with horsemanship. This attitude had rubbed off on Abel, who often involved himself in the more menial aspects of the experience such as cleaning the stable, but he was definitely the exception rather than the rule.

For the princess of a mighty empire like Tearmoon to then request to do the same was not simply exceptional but entirely unthinkable. The question therefore caught Malong completely off guard, and he failed to produce any response aside from a blank, open-mouthed stare.

“Within limits of course,” Mia added. “I’ll do what I can. I’m not sure if I can get up so early every day, but you look like you need help here, so...I mean, it’s a tough process, isn’t it? Giving birth?”

Calculated self-interest was certainly a prominent component of her motivation, but there was something else too. Until fairly recently, Mia had still been openly wondering about how exactly those large birds managed to carry babies to people’s houses. She was more worldly now, having excised such nonsense from her knowledge pool and updated it with proper facts. It was actually a very relevant issue for her, considering the history book claimed that she’d have to produce eight kids. When she’d innocently consulted Chloe about the particulars of where babies came from, her well-read friend had given her a long, silent stare before wordlessly passing her a book. When questioned about its contents, she’d answered, “It’s all explained in there. Just... Um, don’t be too shocked.”

Somewhat intimidated by this strange directive, Mia had gingerly flipped open the book and learned the truth. She was now aware that childbirth was a very *very* difficult process.

*Am I...going to be okay? E-Eight kids?*

Her eyes drifted toward Kayou's distended belly. She rubbed it gently.

"You can do it. I'm rooting for you. I hope you have a magnificent baby."

She smiled at the horse, feeling a strange sense of connection.

# Chapter 14: Good News! Malong's Respect for Mia Grows Even Further

*"We of the Equestrian Kingdom are joined with our horses. We journey through life and over land as one. Horses free us from all bonds and fetters, allowing us to ride endlessly toward the vast expanse of the great beyond, but they also ground us. No matter where we go, our horses link us to the earth. The horse is our soul. Therefore, we must always treat them with the utmost respect."*

These were the words that Malong had inherited from his grandfather, the chief of their clan, whose teachings had been ingrained into his soul. The Central Orthodox Church's sphere of religious influence was vast, and his homeland, the Equestrian Kingdom, was well within its borders. Consequently, like everyone in the neighboring nations, his people also believed in the Holy Deity as the one true God and sole creator of the earth. This also meant that they did not deify horses. However, they did possess a unique view of the creatures that was not shared by their neighbors, which made their entire belief system somewhat special. Like the Lulu of the Tearmoon Empire, who saw God through the trees of their forest, the people of the Equestrian Kingdom saw God through horses. To them, horses were the greatest of the powers that God lent them. The creatures were both treasures of priceless value as well as the spiritual link that connected them to their creator. When preachers of the Central Orthodox Church read verses from the Holy Book that spoke of God's greatest blessing, the people of the Equestrian Kingdom understood it to mean horses.

It went without saying then that they cherished their horses far more than any other nation, and Malong was no different, having been taught so since he was little.

That was why when he'd overheard one of the academy's noble girls grousing about how "Horses are so filthy" and "It's honestly preposterous how they let those smelly beasts roam around inside the academy," he could

not find the grace within himself to forgive her. Back when he'd first enrolled at Saint-Noel, his indignation had gotten him into dispute after dispute, causing a lot of friction between him and his peers. Slowly, however, he'd come to understand that in this academy—and, indeed, throughout the rest of the nations—the opinion professed by that girl was so prevalent as to be "common sense."

In the Equestrian Kingdom, people were accompanied by horses from the day they were born. Horses were family, and they spent their lives with them. In other kingdoms, horses were treated as mere livestock or, in some cases, weapons. Men who rode into battle might develop an affection for the steed that bore them through swords and arrows. For merchants and farmers, horses were valuable sources of labor and likely treated with an appropriate amount of care. For the daughters of nobles though, horses were nothing more than foul-smelling animals.

Sure, these girls were often charmed by young foals, but their adoration was a distant one, the same impersonal appreciation they afforded a fine vase or a neighbor's pet. To them, the ideal object of affection should be sterile, devoid of odors and other such physical unpleasantries. A picture, perhaps. Or a stuffed toy. Beautiful to look at and fun to play with, but without the demands of flesh and blood.

So long as a creature lived, it would eat and defecate. It would smell, no matter how clean it was. That was what it meant to be alive. And yet, these people were so narrow-minded that they couldn't even accept nature—the very sights and scents of life itself. Before he knew it, he'd begun to distance himself from people like that.

Needless to say, Mia's first appearance at the horsemanship club had thrown him for a loop. At first, he'd been wary of her, thinking she might try to harm the horses. There'd previously been a noble girl who'd stepped on some horse dung and screamed at him in a fit of rage, demanding that the horses infesting the academy be exterminated. He had of course dismissed her hysteria with a laugh, but the experience had not been pleasant. The thought that he might have to deal with the same nonsense again weighed on his mind.

Then the *incident* had happened, and through no fault of Mia's own to boot. She hadn't stepped in horse dung out of her own carelessness; she'd been minding her own business. It was the horse who had clopped over and

let loose a big sneeze, coating her in snot and ruining her clothes. Despite suffering a far worse affront, however...Mia did not scream or rage. She'd *laughed*.

"Oh, don't worry. It's no big deal," she'd said, brushing the incident off as if it were no more than a stray hair on her shoulder.

Her willingness to forgive the horse had been shocking enough, but she'd gone further. Unfazed by the slimy affront, she remained eager to try riding, going so far as to join the horsemanship club. Since then she'd put forth an honest and persistent effort toward improving her riding skills, the sight of which left him secretly impressed. Lately, having witnessed her increasingly diligent practice routine, his respect for her had grown further.

*This girl really is something...*

The frequency with which she and Kuolan went through the sneeze-and-scream routine bordered on comedy, but it never deterred her from climbing onto the rheum-prone horse. Time and again, she'd suffer a slimy fate at his nostrils, only to return and continue riding him. Not only that...

*Recently, it seems like she's even trying to read the horse and match his rhythm.*

She didn't turn bitter or blame Kuolan for not listening to her. Rather than grouse, she chose to confront the problem head-on and strove to overcome it. That was what he appreciated the most—the sincerity that underpinned her attitude toward horses. It drew from him a tender fondness, usually reserved for his younger sisters back home, that now permeated all his interactions with her.

Mia didn't stop there. She kept diving deeper, now even asking if she could be involved in the care of the horses.

*I swear, it's almost like she gets a kick out of defying my expectations or something. This girl...*

Ordinary noble girls wouldn't touch a horse stall with a ten-foot pole. It was smelly, they'd say. And icky. And all sorts of other unpleasant adjectives. Mia, as the princess of a mighty empire, should by all rights be even more fastidious than them when it comes to cleanliness. Yet here she was, asking if she could help take care of the horse because she knew giving birth was an arduous process. He saw the way she looked at Kayou as she asked, tender concern swirling in her eyes. Of course, she was a complete amateur. There was no doubt that she'd be of little if any help. But

it was the thought that counted, and it was a thought that bore right into his core, evoking a deep happiness.

"All right... Sure, why not. Let's have you help then. Don't feel any pressure though. Just do what you can."

Malong's heart stirred with gratitude and admiration. Mia, meanwhile...

*Oho ho! Target ingratiated! Mission accomplished!*

...Also stirred, although in her case, it was her mind stirring with calculation and self-interest.

Thus was it decided that Mia would start taking care of Kayou.

# Chapter 15: The Brand Her Soul Carries

Let us take a little detour. A quick digression, in which we circle back to the previous timeline to tell a forgotten tale. It is a small story, faded from memory and lost to time, about unrequited love and a soul consumed by grief.

"No..."

There was the sensation of her legs giving way.

Ruby Etoile Redmoon sank to the ground as the morbid tidings washed over her, squeezing all strength from her limbs. Her long search for the whereabouts of her first and only love had finally borne fruit. But it was a bitter harvest. Fate, in all its wicked humor, had dealt her a cruel hand. Vanos had been present at the Sealence Forest when the conflict with the remote tribe of the Lulu erupted.

And he'd died there.

Wounded by many arrows, their shafts protruding gruesomely from his back, he'd still managed to carry the bodies of two fallen comrades out of the forest with him as his troops retreated, but he'd fallen at the gate of their camp and did not get back up. A vision of his face materialized in Ruby's mind, then grew shadowed and indistinct. She imagined his gentle features bruised and bloodied. The man she'd loved since childhood...

*...Is gone. He's...really gone. Dead. Not coming back. Not ever again.*

Slowly, this truth began to sink in. And it sunk like a rock, like an arrowhead, lodging itself firmly in her core with the weight of a black hole.

"But... How did it come to this? Why did any of this have to happen?"

The forest was Lulu territory. They knew it inside and out. Why had the troops stepped into such an uneven battlefield? And more importantly... What had caused the conflict to erupt in the first place? Why were they fighting their own people?

"We were told that it started with a demand from Viscount Berman. But now I hear the Viscount was acting on orders from higher up."

“Higher up? ...How much higher?”

The man, who claimed to be a survivor of *his* hundred-man squad, said with a flippant shrug, “The princess. Her Highness Mia Luna Tearmoon. She wanted the wood from that forest.”

“...Her Highness?”

“Yes. I believe she wanted some sort of fancy ornamental chest or box...and she wanted it made out of those trees,” the man explained. “The Lulus tried to stop us...so our squad was sent in to get rid of them. That’s the story I heard, anyway.”

His words slithered into her ears with ease, almost as if they had been crafted especially for her.

“That’s...it? All of this...for a trinket?”

A moment’s emptiness.

Then, fury.

Tendrils of rage erupted from her heart and wrapped themselves around her mind and body, making her their slave.

Seasons shifted and years passed. The great famine fell upon the empire. Starvation abounded, death and anger gripped the people of Tearmoon. Upon this fertile soil, the seeds of revolution budded. That was when *she* came.

The imperial princess, Mia Luna Tearmoon, arrived with one of her subordinates to ask the House of Redmoon to deploy their private army. The petition was of course a request for military aid, but it was more important as a message to the people. In order to weaken the revolutionary army’s resolve, they had to make a public show of solidarity, signaling to friend and foe alike that the Emperor and his nobility were a monolith, firmly committed to the empire and to each other.

*There’s still time... We can still stop this from spinning completely out of control...*

They could. She was sure of it. But in spite of that, she went to her father...

“I don’t think this is the time for action.”

...And did everything she could to sway him against intervention, playing every card of military theory and using every trick in the book of rhetoric to prevent him from joining the fray.

She succeeded, and in doing so, indirectly assisted the revolutionary army by allowing them to grow. Eventually, the imperial capital fell, and the flames of revolution burned triumphantly over its ashen ruins.

Fire, however, was not known for its restraint. It spread, consuming not only the emperor's family but all the powerful nobles throughout the empire. Soon the whole of Tearmoon was aflame. The Redmoons' elite private army, though well-trained and strong, could not fend off the scorching tide alone. Absent coordination with the main imperial army, both factions were left isolated and ripe for the enemy's picking.

Resolved to fight to the bitter end, the Redmoons put up a fierce resistance. Their efforts were valiant, but the revolutionary army's momentum ultimately proved unstoppable. As their numbers thinned, her father took personal command and rode out to war. He was soon followed by her younger brothers who, donning plate and helm, left for the battlefield as well.

None returned.

As the surging vanguard of the enemy army flooded her view, Ruby stood on the balcony, looking out over the sea of fire and ash that had been the heart of the Redmoon domain. Her lips trembled.

"Is this...what I wanted?" she murmured. "What...*did* I want?"

Lunatear had already fallen. The imperial army was no longer capable of mounting any form of organized resistance, leaving every noble to fend for themselves. So they did, blocking roads and tightening borders, using what soldiers they had solely for their own isolated defense. No attempt was made to coordinate a united front. After all, the most eminent military faction, the Redmoons, seemed entirely focused on their own survival, having spared not a man for the rest of the empire. In that case, they were surely justified in looking after themselves in the same fashion.

And it could all be traced back to Ruby whispering into her father's ear, advising him to decline Mia's request for aid.

Those fateful words had done the trick. Everything had gone exactly according to plan. Princess Mia, who'd all but ordered Vanos's death, had been captured by the revolutionary army, then executed. It was over. Vengeance was had. Balance restored.

She'd *won*. Victory was hers. And yet...

"This...isn't what I thought..."

The only thing filling her heart now were echoes. She felt hollow. Dreadfully, unbearably hollow. She'd counseled her father to withhold his troops. That was all. Nothing more. Seething with anger but powerless to strike back—she could hardly retaliate directly against the imperial family, much less lead troops in an attempt to take bloody revenge upon the princess—the only option available to her had been to stay in her domain and wait. So wait she had.

She chose *not to fight*. The one her heart had sworn to fight for was already gone. There was nothing left to gain. No one left to protect. No reason to fight anymore.

There was a thunderous crash.

It was the sound of the manor's front door being breached. Soon they would come for her.

Ruby drew her sword. It gleamed in the crimson firelight. She held it up, the skin of her neck mirrored in its well-polished blade.

"Since the day I was born, I've been taught to fight. Trained in the sword, in command, in riding. Melted, forged, and whetted. And in the end, I'm to die in the sheath. Without even a chance to be drawn, to fight, to put my life on the line for something that matters to me..."

She smiled. It was a small smile, wry and worn.

"When life is but a cruel joke, what's left to do but laugh?"

And she drew her sword again. Not out, but across.

The barren sky, infinitely vast and void, was reflected in her eyes as she collapsed into the blood pooling under her. The world darkened, but her despair was darker. In this all-consuming, meaningless blackness Ruby's life reached its end.

...Leaving behind a soul consumed by grief. A soul into which was burned the eternal regret of not being able to fight for the one she loved.

# Chapter 16: Princess Mia...Turns On God Mode

Mia was, by and large, not a morning person. If she could get away with it, she'd gladly sleep until noon, then spend a few more hours lazing in bed. In her world, slovenly decadence was the highest of virtues. Recently, however, her lifestyle had been undergoing a gradual metamorphosis. All that horse riding practice she'd been doing so diligently had been draining all her energy, leaving her absolutely exhausted by the time she shambled back into her room. Having bottomed out on stamina, she slept like a rock which, funnily enough, actually led to very restful nights. Her sleep was deep and steady, and she'd wake up early the following morning raring to go. Early nights and early mornings with a good helping of exercise. Mia, against all odds, had become a poster child for a healthy lifestyle.

Normally, after waking up, she'd either loll around in bed for a while or (re)read one of the novels Elise had sent her. Now, she was getting up at the same time as Anne. Which was good, because...

"Hm, since I managed to get up so early today, I guess I should go pay them a visit... I did say I'd go whenever I could. I mean, I might not be perfectly consistent, but I should at least show up on the first morning after promising. I'd feel sort of bad otherwise..."

As usual, her thought process reeked of poultry. Nevertheless, in a laudable display of discipline, she got out of bed, quicked dressed, and made her way to the stable.

"Whoa, you sure are early, miss," said Malong, failing to hide his astonishment. "I wasn't expecting to see you at this hour..."

"I'll take those words and throw them right back at you." Mia's tone was equally surprised. "I didn't think you'd be tending to the horses at this hour either. Don't tell me you're up this early every morning."

"Well, I mean, this one's about to give birth, so I like to check up on her more often. Besides, it gives me time to give the place a quick sweep. I like

keeping the stable as clean as possible."

"In that case, can I do anything to help?"

"Let me see... Do you want to clean the place together?"

"All right."

Malong handed Mia a long pitchfork used for the stalls. She took it and rolled up her sleeves.

*Okay, if I'm doing this, then I'm going to do a good job. Malong and Anne are both watching, so I can't afford to slack off. Plus, this is my chance to ingratiate myself with Kayou!*

After finishing all her assigned tasks, Mia departed the stables.

"Phew, I'm exhausted...and my arms hurt. Ugh..."

Suddenly, she felt a cool breeze on the back of her neck. The sensation was refreshingly pleasant on her sweat-soaked skin. She stretched, allowing her tired muscles to relax...before they all tensed at once as she jumped in surprise.

"Eeek! Wh-What was tha— Oh, it's you..."

Kuolan had somehow walked up to her unnoticed and was currently standing languidly behind her. The breeze she'd just felt had actually been a breath. With this added context, the experience suddenly felt a lot less refreshing. It brought its muzzle close to her hair, nostrils twitching the way it always did when her head was within sneezing distance. Mia, however, did not run. Instead, she faced it with arms akimbo.

"Hah, too bad for you. It doesn't matter how dirty I get, because I'm about to go for a morning bath! Come on, go ahead! Do your worst!"

That's right. By getting some morning exercise, Mia had effectively turned on God Mode. She was now invincible to filth and grime. All that cleaning she'd done in the stable had left her sweat-soaked, so she was on her way to the bathhouse. The way she saw it, she could have a tub of mud dumped on her at this point and it wouldn't matter, because she was going to wash it all off anyway.

It was more or less the same as spreading honey on bread. Suppose that she was having breakfast, and there was a loaf of bread with a jar of honey. Mia, being something of a budding epicure, had a preferred way of eating bread with honey that she always followed. Specifically, she'd break the loaf in two, revealing its fluffy innards. Then she'd spread honey over the

exposed surfaces. She'd completely coat the inside before taking a bite, so it was possible for her to have some fun with the honey beforehand. Like drawing some honey art. Or at least some honey doodles.

For example, and this is entirely hypothetical, she could scribble "Mia♥Abel" and giggle to herself for a while before covering the rest of the surface with honey to hide her tracks. Again, this is entirely hypothetical. While it's true that doing so would often result in more honey on her bread, which certainly sounds like the kind of thing she'd do all the time, it would be slanderous to claim that she actually engaged in such acts, and any accounts of such should be treated as evidence of the interminable spread of fake news.

At any rate, by applying the principles of I'll-just-cover-it-with-more-honey-after-ism, or perhaps you-can't-prove-I-did-it-if-I-eat-the-evidence-ology, Mia decided that since she was going to get herself cleaned up in the bath anyway, she didn't care how dirty she got. God Mode Mia had nothing to fear!

"What's the matter? Come on! Sneeze on me all you want! Go nuts! It won't bother me one bit!" she said, all but cackling while she taunted Kuolan. The sheer smugness on display was, frankly, *very* annoying.

Kuolan, for its part, just sort of...turned its face away and plodded off.

"Oho—ho? Huh? You're not going to sneeze?"

She stared at its retreating rump, feeling a kind of awkward frustration as if a punchline had been left undelivered. A hint of disappointment clouded her brow.

"Hnnnngh, I'm finally in a position to stick it to that stupid horse by shrugging off its sneezes, and he just ignores me? Does he know? Was he doing it on purpose all those other times? Or...maybe he has finally decided to kneel before my superiority."

And with timing so perfect it could be attributed to almost nothing except linguistic comprehension, Kuolan stopped exactly when she finished her last sentence. It looked at her, pulled up the corners of its lips...

*Neigh-hee-hee.*

...And laughed. Or it sounded like laughing to Mia, at least.

"Wh-What the— You— Did you just *laugh* at me? Grr, you stupid horse! You're definitely doing this on purpose!"

Kuolan spared her no further glances. Instead, it simply shook its big,

bushy tail at her.

“Augh! Stop that! Am I just a joke to you?”

Swoosh swoosh went the horse’s tail, the motion as lazy as it was mocking.

# Chapter 17: Princess Mia Is a Sheep in Wolf's— Nay, Horse's Clothing!

"Phew... I think that's the last of them."

Mia gave the flocculent pile of hay one final slap with her giant pitchfork. It bounced back a little, but remained a passably presentable pile.

Almost seven whole days had passed since she began getting up early and heading straight over to Kayou in the morning. At first, she'd only planned to show up on the first day, then return to getting plenty of beauty sleep, but a strange phenomenon kept her coming back. For some reason, after taking care of Kayou the first time, Kuolan was a lot easier to ride.

As an experiment, she'd repeated the process on the following day, tending to Kayou before heading over to Kuolan. Again, her steed had—relatively, at least—behaved in an obedient fashion, and she'd again finished the session without a mucous makeover.

"What in the moons is going on?"

So she put on her detective hat. Then, she gobbled up some sweets. She chewed and thought, and thought and chewed, and chewed and chewed... Finally, she arrived at a conclusion!

"Hah, I see what's going on now. Basically..." She spun toward some invisible audience, eyes opening with dramatic flair. "Kayou is the boss horse!"

This conclusion was further supported by her observation that Kayou displayed a stately elegance that Kuolan did not possess. Nor, in fact, did any of the other horses. Kayou seemed a veritable queen among her kind. Proud and exuding an aura of regality, it was truly a horse among horses!

"Which must mean...Kuolan's scared! He's behaving himself because he realized his boss is around! Oho ho, for all his attitude, he's clearly just a lowly flunky in the moonhare hierarchy."

The logic lined up with her own experiences as well. Real bosses rarely adopted excessively bossy attitudes; oftentimes, it was actually the small fry

who went around acting big and important. In the previous timeline, she'd seen no shortage of ostensibly high and mighty nobles whose swagger immediately evaporated in her presence, only to be replaced by servile pandering. The situation with the horses was the exact same dynamic.

"I bet Kayou's scent rubbed off on me when I was taking care of her. Then, when I went to Kuolan, he caught a whiff of his boss and got scared."

It all made so much sense to her. In fact, she even empathized with Kuolan, for she felt the exact same way in front of Rafina or Sion. There existed certain beings in this world that under no circumstances should ever be defied. This was a cosmic truth, and one that seemed to apply to both humans and horses. In which case...

"I'd be a total fool not to take advantage of this!"

Upon that realization, Mia resolved to exploit the authority of a greater being. She was going to be a sheep in wolf's— Nay, *horse's* clothing! From that day forward, she religiously kept to her schedule, going to Kayou first thing in the morning. In order to cloak herself in as much of Kayou's scent as possible, she worked vigorously, washing the horse's body, drying it off, and—with Malong's guidance—even began combing its hair.

"Hmm... Something about this hair...feels kind of familiar. It's so nice. I wonder..." she'd murmured to herself when examining it closely for the first time.

On the eighth day, Mia arrived at the stable as usual.

"Good afternoon, Kayou, how are you doing?"

Kayou returned her greeting by quietly lifting its head. The motion was slow. Almost too slow. She frowned.

"Oh? You don't look quite right... Hm, I should probably ask Malong to take a look at you later," she said as she began her routine cleaning of the stable.

By now, she was showing up in proper work gear. She'd wrapped a cloth around her head and worn clothes that she didn't mind getting dirty. With her long-sleeved shirt and rugged trousers, she worked with practiced efficiency, both looking and feeling the part of a seasoned stable cleaner. No, more like a seasoned *horse specialist*. That's how she *felt*, anyway.

"Mmm hm hm, I don't know what it is about this kind of work, but it's sort of nice. Feels good to do."

She ate a lot and rode a lot. Then ate a lot and worked a lot. Then ate a

lot and slept a lot. One could say she'd reached the zenith of healthy lifestyles. Of course, one could also say she was living on a knife's edge, for any zenith was also a precipice, upon which the slightest decrease in exercise would send her plunging down the chasm of F.A.T. Regardless, she finished cleaning the stall, took a step back to examine her work, and felt an odd sense of accomplishment. A smile touched the corners of her mouth.

"Well, they do say that in Perujin, the royalty head down into the fields with their people to personally lead the harvest, and the Rudolvons apparently do the same. I think I finally understand why. There's something satisfying about a good day's sweat for a good day's work," she said before moving onto the next stall, glistening beads of honest effort adorning her brow.

"Hi, Miss Mia."

"I hope we're not intruding on anything, Your Highness."

A pair of young, adorable voices sounded at the door.

"My, Bel. And, uh, Rina. What are you doing here? Oh, are you here for a tour?" asked Mia, remembering the exchange in the communal bath the other day. "I do remember you saying you're interested in horses."

"Yes, we were hoping we could be shown around," Citrina said with a sweet smile.

Both of the girls were in their school uniforms which, in this case, screamed "tourist." They were definitely not suitable for wearing into the stable. Seeing this, Mia let out a cocky *hmph* and grinned.

*Well, as the resident specialist, I guess I'd better show these newbies what horses are all about.*

"Wow, grand— Miss Mia, this horse is so beautiful," said Bel as she walked toward Kayou.

"Absolutely. The academy keeps quite a few horses, but that one is probably the most beautiful of them all."

*Unlike a certain someone!* Mia added inwardly. *Stupid Kuolan...*

"Once I'm done cleaning, you can come and watch me ride too," said Mia.

"Really? Thank you! Hee hee. See, Rina? I told you. Miss Mia is an amazing person. She has mastered the art of rid— Huh?" Bel paused before continuing in a concerned tone. "Miss Mia, I think there's something wrong with this horse. It looks like...it's hurting somewhere..."

“...Eh?”

And so, Mia was presented with an unprecedented dilemma.

# Chapter 18: The Mystery of Life and an Odd Déjà Vu

“Wh-Wh-What’s the matter, Kayou?”

Mia rushed over to discover the horse lying on its side, its breaths labored and unsteady.

“Oh no! Oh no! Anne! Get Malong! Quick!”

“Yes, I’m on it!”

She watched Anne go before returning to Kayou’s side and crouching down.

“Hold on, Kayou. Malong will be here any second,” she said in a reassuring tone. “Once he comes—”

She heard heavy steps behind her.

“What’s going on? Something’s wrong with Kayou?”

Malong burst through the door. The sheer relief of seeing him threatened to turn her legs into jelly, and her attempt to step aside turned into an awkward waddle as she made room for him beside the horse.

“Kayou looks like she’s in a lot of pain,” Mia explained. “But maybe everyone looks like this when they’re giving birth. I’m not sure, so...”

Her words withered away as Malong’s expression grew strained.

“...Normally, horses can give birth on their own. They’re not supposed to need our help.” He bit his lip. “If they have trouble...”

There was a brief silence followed by the sound of him gulping. He looked Mia in the eye.

“This one might be a breech birth.”

“A breech birth?”

Malong ventured an explanation, only to be cut off by a loud and strained whinny from Kayou. At the same time, a tiny hind leg jutted out from Kayou’s nether regions.

“Damn it! It’s happening too fast. I told your attendant to go fetch the stable master, but at this rate, they won’t make it in time. Gonna have to

pull this off ourselves. Give me a hand."

"...Eh?"

The request went right over her head. She turned around, gazing blankly around the stable wondering who it could possibly be directed toward before it came back and hit her like a boomerang.

*Wait, what? Huh? Me? I-Is he talking to me?!*

Panic stiffened her limbs, but she suddenly caught a glimpse of the other two girls. Citrina was looking at her with a hint of nervousness. Bel, meanwhile, was practically glowing with excitement. This was not a battle she could afford to dodge.

"V-Very well then. Let's do this."

Her expression hardened with a warrior's resolve as she regarded the suffering mother horse.

*Don't worry, Kayou. I'm here for you. You'll have all the help you need!*

The thought was not followed by her usual deliberation of debts and favors. Rather, it had come from a place of empathy.

*This poor girl...is me in the future.*

Compelled by a deep sense of connection with the horse, she rolled up her sleeves, determined to do whatever it took to ensure a safe birth for mother and child.

The rest was all a blur. Nervousness, coupled with a constant and desperate attempt to keep up with Malong's instructions, had left her mind with limited resources to form memories. She could only recall fragmentary events—waiting on Malong's signal, pulling on the protruding legs with all her strength, her own exhausted breathing, and grabbing the legs again for another go. As her senses returned, she found herself collapsed on the ground, so weary that her limbs were having trouble supporting her own weight. In front of her, a baby horse lay unmoving in the shadow of a kneeling Malong. His voice faded into her consciousness.

"—not breathing!"

With a curse, he wiped the newborn's mouth with his shirt before pressing his own to it. Mia just watched him do it, too tired to react with more than silent observation. He breathed out. Once, twice, thrice, four times... He kept going. Minutes and seconds melted into each other. How much time had passed? How many breaths had been given? She'd lost

count.

Malong straightened and looked down at the baby horse. It didn't move.

"*Damn* it..." he spat bitterly, lip pinched so tightly between his teeth it was a wonder he hadn't drawn blood.

Mia heard her own incredulous voice.

"No... It can't be..."

She numbly looked toward Kayou. The horse's eyes seemed to take on a sorrowful cast.

"No... We can't give up. There has to be something. Something more we can do."

The intensity of her reaction surprised her. The bond she'd developed with Kayou was far stronger, and far deeper, than she'd realized.

"There must be something we can still do. Some way to help..."

Her mind raced with desperation, but to no avail. Then, help came from the place she'd least expected it.

"...Try this. It might help."

Citrina took a step forward. She held out her hand. In her palm was a small cloth satchel.

"What's that?" asked Malong, frowning.

"A medicinal herb," she answered with an expression more serious than any Mia'd ever seen her wear. "A cardiotonic, to be exact. It's supposed to stimulate the heart and restore its strength."

Malong reached for the satchel, paused, then he shook himself out of it.

"If we do nothing, this foal won't make it anyway. Might as well give it a try," he muttered, the words meant more for himself than for anyone else.

After a final moment of hesitation, he took the satchel and emptied its contents into the baby horse's mouth. A long silence ensued. Then, a tiny cough. Malong pumped his fist and let out a whoop of joy.

"Yes! They're breathing!"

As if on cue, the tiny foal shivered and began to wiggle its legs in an attempt to stand.

Mia drew in a long breath and exhaled, feeling the tension leave her body.

"We did it!" She looked toward Citrina. "Thank you very much, Rina. You saved this baby horse's life!"

"No need to thank Rina, Your Highness. I'm just glad I could help out."

Citrina smiled the same sweet smile as always and said nothing more. Mia acknowledged her with a nod before turning to kneel down next to Kayou.

“You did a great job... You gave birth to a healthy little baby horse.”

She gently stroked its neck. Its eyes were placid as they regarded her, but she thought she could see in them the confidence of someone who knew they’d just accomplished a momentous feat.

“Mmm hm hm. Now then, I think it’s time for me to take a good look at the little one. Everyone wants a peek, so it looks like you’ll have to wait your turn, Kayou.”

She giggled before strolling over to the baby horse. Along the way, a thought occurred to her.

*On that note, I wonder who Kayou’s mate is. Whichever horse he is, I’m sure he’s wonderful...*

Mia’s empathy for Kayou had grown so deep that it bordered on a spiritual link. She felt so close to the horse that the boundaries of their existences were starting to blur in her mind, as though girl and horse were becoming one. Looking at Kayou was like gazing at her future self. Therefore, she had no doubt that the mate Kayou had selected was a horse of exceptional quality. Why? Because Mia was confident in her own taste in men. If Kayou was her equine soulmate, then surely...

As she studied the baby horse her brow furrowed.

“My, something about this horse seems familiar... I can’t quite put my finger on what though...”

Struck by a sudden sense of déjà vu, she struggled to determine the source of the sensation. Trying to get a better look, she leaned in and brought her face closer. That was when she noticed its tiny nostrils twitching.

*Ker-choo!*

It let out an adorable baby sneeze. Lightly spattered by baby horse snot, she came to an important realization! Well, she would have, had her brain not forcibly shut down its logical faculties in a stubborn attempt to deny itself comprehension. After all, Mia felt a very deep sense of empathy toward Kayou, so much so that she saw the horse as her future self! And she had excellent taste in men! So there was no way Kayou would have picked...that stupid, good-for-nothing jackass as a mate!

Faced with this logical dilemma, her subconscious took the reins and slapped the steed of her thoughts, sending it soaring clean over the answer before galloping into the unknown horizon.

"...Hm, I wonder why horses keep sneezing on me. Maybe it's a curse or something."

Alas, it is the nature of man to not see that which they do not wish to see.

# Chapter 19: A Horse as Red as the Setting Sun

"Ugh... I am *so* tired..."

With exhaustion written all over her face, Mia shambled out of the stable. Before she could leave, a horse clopped over to her. It was her good old training partner.

"Ah... Kuolan..."

It neighed. The sound lacked its usual energy. In fact, the horse seemed a tad wilted in spirit.

"My... Did you come because you're worried about your boss? Well, aren't you the thoughtful underling? I'm sort of impressed."

She stroked Kuolan's neck with a gentle smile.

"Mmm hm hm, relax. Your boss is fine. Both mother and child are safe and sound."

Mia fundamentally had no regard for those who behaved obsequiously around her. The previous timeline had taught her just how easily that kind of servile ingratiation would change to cold indifference the minute she lost her position and power. There was no weight to it. No consistency. She refused to acknowledge any value in something so ethereal. What if, for example, the person they abandoned ended up bouncing back and regaining power? It was easy to see how they'd be viewed in an even worse light than people who'd been enemies from the beginning.

Mia had no interest in nor need for such capricious behavior. This world, after all, was one in which it was possible to miraculously rewind time after dying. Such conditional bootlicking was hardly sufficient. She needed real loyalty.

Of course, she understood the desire to put tongue to boot before a figure of overwhelming authority. She understood it very well. Heck, she frequently engaged in salivary polishing of footwear herself. And because she did so, she had a deep appreciation for *commitment*. While she scorned

half-hearted sycophants who turned on a dime, she considered those whose lips remained steadfastly on powerful derrieres to be like-minded comrades. To that end...

“Even though your boss has been weakened by giving birth, you’re still coming to see her like usual. Maintaining a deferential attitude despite her vulnerability... Quite the admirable display, if I do say so myself. You know, I think I’ve been a little too hard on you, Kuolan.”

She felt a deep connection with the horse and saw in it a kindred soul. Given this newfound sympathy...

“Just so you know, Kuolan, my friends and I were in there the whole time helping your dear boss give birth. You can go ask her about it directly later, but it was a really close call. The baby almost didn’t make it. Thanks to some quick thinking from my friend though, we managed to save the little one’s life.”

...She decided to squeeze as much ingratiation out of the event as possible, pointing out to Kuolan that not only was she in the good graces of its boss, she’d done a big favor for the one who was next in line to the equine throne. She’d already curried favor with the next generation of horse leaders!

“So,” she said as Kuolan regarded her with its big, beady horse eyes, “I’d appreciate some help during the Horsemanship Tournament, if you know what I mean.”

With the knowing smile of bribe-accepting politicians, she patted the horse on the neck. Kuolan, for its part, kept staring meekly at her, its long face unchanged. Whether or not it understood her was anyone’s guess. Just then, its ears twitched before it lifted its head and looked around.

“Hm? What’s the matter?” Mia said with a puzzled frown.

Smart though Kuolan might be, it was still a horse, so no verbal response was forthcoming. Her answer came instead in the form of steady clopping sounds followed by a salutation.

“Well, if it isn’t Your Highness. Greetings.”

She turned toward the brisk voice.

“My, Ruby. Greetings.”

Ruby Etoile Redmoon leapt off her horse and walked over before lowering herself into a formal bow.

“Are you going to the riding grounds?” asked Mia. “Also, that’s...a

pretty impressive horse you got there...”

She studied Ruby’s steed. It looked terribly fast. Smooth arcs of protruding muscle ran down its burly hind legs, hinting at the force with which it could kick at the ground. Its torso was imposing as well. Lean but firm, it bore Ruby without the slightest hint of strain. Its most striking characteristic, however, was something else.

“I never knew horses could have hair so red.”

Every strand seemed to be ablaze with the vermillion light of the evening sun. The fluttering of its lustrous mane resembled the shimmering heat hazes of summer, as though its body burned hot enough to distort the surrounding air. It stood with the air of a monarch.

“Appreciate the compliment, Your Highness. It’s an honor. This horse is a special one, even for us. The fastest and finest of all the moonhares.” Ruby ran her hand through its crimson mane. “It’s the one and only Skyred Hare, said to be able to keep pace with the moon and dash at the very edge of nightfall, red skies in pursuit but never catching up.”

“Skyred Hare...”

The horse looked at Mia, intelligence radiating from its eyes, and let out a short whinny as if in acknowledgment of its name.

*My, there’s almost an elegance to its features. If horses had nobility, this one would be among their number.*

Then she shifted her gaze toward her own steed.

*...Somehow, I can’t see Kuolan putting up much of a fight. This horse is out of its league*, she thought with a sigh.

Just then, she noticed a curious gesture from Skyred Hare. Whereas it had been behaving gently around Mia and treating her with respect, when it glanced at Kuolan...it *snorted*! Realization dawned on Mia through pure reflexive instinct.

*Ah, this horse is definitely a jerk!*

“Now then, I must excuse myself,” said Ruby as she mounted again. “See you at the tournament. I look forward to our event.”

True to their names, they became a whirl of red as they galloped off toward the riding grounds, leaving Mia and Kuolan to watch their shrinking forms through the cloud of dust in their wake. Having just witnessed Skyred Hare’s speed, Mia became sure of her fate.

*Well, that’s it. I’ve lost. Practicing more, getting used to riding*

*Kuolan...none of that even matters. They're on another level.*

She regarded her horse, who seemed neither angry nor sullen. It simply watched with perfect placidity as Skyred Hare disappeared into the distance.

*Ah, so you've realized it too. That's right. You don't stand a chance. Neither of us do...*

She let out a disheartened sigh, feeling her spirits sink. The tournament was only three days away.

# Chapter 20: Princess Mia Will Stay True to Herself, No Matter the Situation

The remaining time sped by, and before she knew it, the day of the Horsemanship Tournament had arrived. The event would take place in the same riding grounds Mia had always used to practice. The sky was clear, and the gentle autumn wind was cool and refreshing.

Mia threw her arms up and stretched. Then she glanced around the venue.

"I have to say..."

The riding grounds that would function as the arena for the tournament occupied a vast expanse of land. It was so big that it would probably take Mia half a day to walk around the whole perimeter. And that was assuming she didn't give up halfway. According to Malong, each lap of the racing course was a thousand moontales in length, and the first to finish two laps would win.

Some distance away from the course was an encircling ring of countless tents. A number of shop stalls had been put up too, from which drifted appetizing aromas that made Mia's nose twitch restlessly. They weren't all food stalls either. Some sold equestrian clothing. One of the odder ones she'd seen had been selling stuffed horse toys.

"My, it's very lively here..."

The excitement in the air was infectious, and she couldn't help but smile. Nevertheless, she remained puzzled by one thought.

*It's so strange. How come I have no recollection of this?* she thought as she thumbed through the reports sent to the student council by the tournament's organizers. *Was this...always a thing?*

She scratched her head. During her life in the previous timeline, she should have witnessed this tournament on at least two separate occasions. Sure, it might have been canceled later on when the empire started falling apart, but there were those first two years when it should have happened.

Instead, she drew a complete blank; there were no memories of this event whatsoever. Perplexed, she poked Anne, who was standing beside her. Unable to ask the question directly, what with it involving a different timeline, she framed it in a roundabout manner.

"Say, Anne, did this tournament happen last year around this time too?"

"Last year, I believe you were busy dealing with the trouble in Remno around this time."

"Ah." Mia nodded. "I see. I left for Remno right after the summer vacation ended, so I guess the timing does line up... The tournament probably took place when I came back and was dealing with the aftermath."

More specifically, it would have taken place while she was rolling around in bed all day, having been exhausted by the ordeal she'd delegated all the cleanup work to Ludwig.

*I could barely even muster the energy to go to class, so I suppose it makes sense that I missed the tournament. Abel and Sion were both tied up with the fallout in their respective kingdoms, so they probably didn't participate either.*

Her thoughts were interrupted by a familiar voice.

"That's not the only reason it feels different. It's extra lively this year, and it's because of none other than yourself, miss."

"My, Malong," she said, turning to find him standing behind her. "You — Huh. You're dressed rather nicely today."

Taking a step back to get a better look at his entire outfit, she crossed her arms and hummed in appraisal for a while. The most prominent feature on his clothing was a large horse, embroidered with a dazzling array of colors. Threads of naturally pure hues criss-crossed in intricate fashion, blacks, golds, and reds intertwining with blues, yellows, and greens. He wore a robe-like shirt folded across itself at the front in the eastern style with long trousers that reached his ankles. On his head was a small round hat. It was almost certainly a form of traditional dress in the Equestrian Kingdom.

"This is formal wear for our clan," he said with a hearty laugh. "Of all the days, this is one where I definitely have to dress up."

He looked out across the large arena, eyes filling with emotion.

"Look at this crowd... It's like the whole academy is here. And for what? A *horsemanship* tournament. Didn't think I'd ever see the day... Talk about bucket lists..."

“Um, I’m not sure I follow. You said this was...because of me?”

He grinned at her befuddled face.

“What, didn’t you know? There’s been a bit of a horse riding boom at Saint-Noel lately.”

She blinked.

“Is that so? I had no idea.”

While it was true that she’d noticed some new faces in the horsemanship club recently and the topic of horses had been coming up more often in classroom conversations, she’d assumed it to be the effect of the approaching tournament.

“Why is that because of me though?”

“Don’t you remember? When you were campaigning for student council president, you went around riding a horse.”

“Ah, true. I do remember doing that.”

It had happened too long ago for her goldfish-spanned memory to recall without external prompting.

*I remember thinking “What in the moons am I doing with my life?” while I rode around the academy...*

The thought made her eyes grow distant.

“I’ve got people saying they joined because the new president rides horses as a hobby,” continued Malong, “so they wanted to give it a try themselves. The girls, especially, really seem to have taken a liking to you. A lot of them tell me about how they really admire the way you stayed true to yourself despite the pressures of the campaign.”

He didn’t lie. The sight of Mia sitting tall and proud on horseback had indeed left a strong impression on her peers.

“Huh. So that’s what’s going on...” she said in a contemplative tone.

The hitherto unknown influence she’d inadvertently had on the academy was certainly food for thought.

“Those pastries with skewers through them... They look so good...”

...Of course, food for thought wasn’t nearly as interesting as thoughts of food, and since Mia always stayed true to herself, it was the latter that occupied her mind.

# Chapter 21: Premonition of Bumpiness

“Hm, I think this’ll do.”

“Yes, you look wonderful, milady.”

In a tent set up for changing, Mia finished donning her riding clothes—a white blouse and brown shirt with short pants and shin-high boots. With a touch of panache, she placed her hat on her head. For a moment, an aura of equestrian verve radiated from her, only to be doused by her next words.

“...Mmm, it feels a little tight around the stomach.”

She patted her belly. It jiggled ever so slightly.

“I guess I shouldn’t have eaten so much at the stalls...”

On a table beside her lay not one, not two, not even three, but six! Six barren skewers, all deprived of the little cupcakes that had once adorned them. She’d gorged herself so fully on the delicious treats that Kuolan might just decide to go on strike, refusing to carry what would now be a human-shaped anvil on its back.

“Fwaaah...” She shielded a yawn with her hand. “Also, I’m starting to feel sort of sleepy now. Ugh, I’m not up for this. But they smelled so good. Hmph, it’s not my fault. Those pastries weren’t playing fair.”

While she was busy making excuses to no one in particular, someone rapped on the door flap.

“Excuse me? Princess Mia?”

“My, Chloe. Come in please.”

At Mia’s beckoning, Chloe stepped into the tent, followed by a small army of students both male and female.

“Tiona too? And who might all of you be?”

The group, led by Chloe and Tiona, consisted of the supporters of Mia’s election campaign, and they’d gathered once again to cheer for her. The atmosphere about them was a tad different from before, most strikingly exemplified by the skewer of cupcakes in Tiona’s hand, which Mia noticed with a wry smile.

*Well, times have certainly changed. I suppose we can’t always be in*

*campaign mode.*

They were here to support her, yes, but this was also a day of fun and excitement, meant to be enjoyed. Clearly, they'd been doing far more of the latter. Tiona, tracing Mia's gaze toward her own hand, hastily tried to hide it behind her back.

"U-Um, this is... I just—"

Mia smiled and held out one of her own now cupcake-less skewers.

"It's so hard to resist, isn't it? You see them, and the next thing you know, you're reaching for your coin purse."

They shared an embarrassed giggle like children caught red-handed mid-prank.

"Try your best, Your Highness. We're all rooting for you."

"Thank you, Tiona, and all of you too. I'll do my best."

Mia dipped her head at her supporters in a small bow. They had, after all, come here to cheer her on, and that deserved proper recognition.

*Of course, it's not the support I'm worried about here...*

Last time, her opponent had been Rafina. This time, things were different. Ruby's standing, no matter the power and influence of her father and house, still paled in comparison to Mia's. She was pretty much guaranteed Sapphias's support, both as princess and a fellow member of the student council. Esmeralda, despite the occasional friction in their relationship, would probably side with her as well. On top of that, Bel had even roped Citrina into cheering for her.

*Huh... Wait a minute. Is it just me or am I actually coming into this tournament with a lot of momentum? I've got three of the Four Houses on my side.*

Furthermore, she had the saintly support of Rafina, along with Sion and Abel's backing. Even Malong of the Equestrian Kingdom was rooting for her. Her influence arguably spanned the entirety of the continent. Mia was on a roll!

*I'd crush her in the polls! If there were any polls for me to crush her in...*

She smiled. It was a hollow, mirthless smile, as empty as her "victory."

*I won the popularity contest. Go me.* Her brief attempt at escapism only called more attention to her hopeless reality. She let out a morose sigh. *If only this were the student council election...*

Indeed, popularity was irrelevant this time. The element being tested

was her riding technique and—arguably more importantly—the speed of her horse.

*That red horse... Skyred Hare, was it? I doubt Kuolan can put up much of a fight against that...*

She was half ready to throw in the towel when Chloe offered some advice.

"So, Princess Mia, as I was saying, we took a look at the course and..." She pushed up her glasses, causing them to flash dramatically, and looked Mia in the eye. "I think this tournament is going to be...a *bumpy* one."

"...What? Bumpy?"

Baffled, Mia tilted her head. Chloe nodded.

"*Very* bumpy. We took a look at the course earlier, and we found that a lot of it is still muddy from the rain."

It was perfect, cloudless weather for the tournament today, but the previous day had seen sustained rain. Mud and puddles would hardly be a surprising sight.

"Muddy, huh..." Mia murmured with a purse-lipped frown.

*That...sounds like it'll make for some tricky riding...*

If the ground were in the same condition as her practice sessions, she might have had a chance. Now, with this new obstacle, one wrong move could result in a painful and involuntary dismount.

*So much for my chances of winning. Not that I had much of a chance to begin with. I can still forfeit though. Maybe I should just do that...* she thought with increasing bearishness at her own prospects at victory.

Chloe, however, smiled at her.

"That's right, and it's going to make things *very* interesting."

"Eh? What do you mean?"

"Simply put, the speed of the horse won't be the only factor that determines who wins anymore. Now, your skill at handling your horse is more important. And there's room for strategy. Luck comes into play too."

The women's division of the speedriding event, which Mia was competing in, had a grand total of two competitors. The recent horse riding boom among the girls hadn't quite produced a flock of *cavalières* in the academy. Interest, after all, always grew far faster than actual competence. As a matter of fact, Malong's younger sister had meant to race with them, but...

“Ha ha ha, that’ll make for one hell of a lopsided race,” Malong had said. “Those two are no match for you. They’ve got this whole thing going with a duel and stakes and everything, so how about we just let ’em have their time in the sun? After all, ‘second to cross the finish line wins’ doesn’t quite have the same ring to it.”

...At his advice, she’d instead entered the men’s division, setting the stage for a one-to-one duel between Mia and Ruby with the latter widely considered the favorite. The reason wasn’t actually the riders themselves, but their steeds. The one that Ruby had brought to the race, Skyred Hare, was one of the most famous horses on the continent, and spectator opinion was largely unanimous as to its supremacy.

“The horses bred in Saint-Noel are very good, but they can’t possibly beat *that* horse, right?”

“Those Redmoons are such killjoys. Like, come on. Why would you bring a horse like that to a school competition?”

Such speculation failed to stifle Chloe’s optimism. She gave Mia an encouraging shake of her fist and said, “It’s slim, but it’s still a chance! You might just win this!”

Mia regarded her for a moment, then sighed.

*It’s a chance, sure, but it’s still slim...*

# Chapter 22: It Is I, Mia Luna Seamoon!

“Hm... Chloe was right. This is pretty tough to walk through. All this muck means we can’t start off too fast or we’ll get too tired toward the end.”

During the downtime after the conclusion of the men’s speedriding event, Mia had a moment to feel out the course, so she rode a lap on Kuolan’s back, making sure to keep a *very* leisurely pace to avoid any embarrassing accidents.

“The rain yesterday really did a number here. The ground’s so uneven it’s going to be really easy to trip... Good thing I did a trial run first.”

Mia tended to get cocky, and she often slacked off, but she was ultimately a coward at heart. Boldly confronting unknown perils was not her thing. Given a chance to check things out beforehand, she was definitely going to take the opportunity. Especially after Chloe warned her about the potential dangers underfoot.

“Even with Chloe’s advice though, riding on this kind of ground isn’t going to be easy,” she grumbled with a frustrated sigh.

After dabbing some light sweat from her forehead, she took another look at the course and gulped, the bumpiness of her test run still fresh in her memory. Actually, it wasn’t technically a “test run.” Specifically, it wasn’t a “run.” In equestrian jargon, gaits of different speeds had different names. There was the canter, a brisk stride slower than a full gallop. Slightly slower was the trot. Slower than that, the walk. Then came whatever it was that Mia used while circling the course, a plodding shuffle so slow that birds actually landed on Kuolan’s head to enjoy a quick break. Absolute caution was the name of the game, making for a test *stroll* that, to her credit, did at least provide ample time to enjoy the scenery.

“If I want to make it to the finish line in one piece, it’s going to be critical that I start slow. The last stretch of the course is straight and relatively dry, so I should take my time until I reach it. Or maybe I should just hope Ruby messes up and stumbles somewhere...”

With the addition of Safety First to her usual principle of Mia First, she immediately gave up all intention of properly winning the race.

"In that case, I should probably go full speed in the beginning as a bluff. That way, she'll panic and try to pull ahead. If she then ends up tripping over a ditch somewhere, maybe..."

Time passed quickly while she schemed. Soon, it was time for their race to begin. They drew lots to decide their lanes, and Mia secretly rejoiced upon seeing the one she'd been assigned.

*Yes! I got a good lane!*

Not too far ahead of where Ruby sat on Skyred Hare was a muddy area. If she went straight, she'd plunge right into the muck. If she avoided it, it'd cost her time.

*It's not much, but it's all I have right now. I doubt I'll win through this alone. Still, a small advantage is better than no advantage.*

She glanced at Kuolan.

"I have to say though, I'd appreciate a little more enthusiasm from you..."

The rain had prevented her from practicing yesterday, but the day of rest hadn't infused the horse with any extra energy. Ever since Kayou had given birth, Kuolan had been growing more and more placid.

*Hnnngh, what's the matter, Kuolan? How come you're so indifferent? Have you just accepted our fate?*

It had remained unruffled even in the face of Skyred Hare's open derision. She remembered the look in Kuolan's eyes. It was similar to how adults would look at children engaging in the natural mischief of their age, before making a comment to the effect of "Oh, what am I going to do with you," a question belied by the fond smiles on their faces.

"What happened to the old Kuolan? The one with attitude? Who tried to buck me every time we went for a run? I need the old Kuolan back, or I won't have any chance at winning..."

Just then, she noticed a familiar figure out of the corner of her eye.

"Oh, look, Kuolan. It's your boss."

The other moonhare, led by Malong, clopped over with regal grace.

"All right, Kayou's watching, so you'd better get serious. Or would you rather humiliate yourself in front of the head honcho?"

Her provocation bounced off Kuolan like a pebble against a brick wall.

It turned its head toward Kayou and grinned. There was still no sense of *fight* to the horse.

"Augh, this is not the time to be fooling around! What, are you going to grin Ruby's horse into submission? Come on! We might not win, but for the sake of our dignities, we have to at least put up a decent fi— Ah."

A third figure came between the two horses, blocking their view of one another. Skyred Hare, with Ruby saddled firmly on its back, let out a melodious whinny. It looked at Kayou and flicked its tail. There was an elegance to the way the crimson horse carried itself.

*Aaaah, it's so graceful. Just like Kayou. They'd be such a good match...*

The thought crossed her mind mere moments before she sensed a sudden tension in the air.

"Hm?"

It seemed to be radiating from Kuolan's direction, and it felt like an aura...of something hot.

"Kuolan... What's gotten into you?"

It nickered and blew air from its nose, its expression as tranquil as always.

"Huh? Well, that's odd. I swear I felt..." she muttered, inclining her head to one side in bemusement.

The stakes were high, the stage was set, and their duel was about to begin.

"All right, listen, Kuolan. We're going all out from the very start. Understand? We're *going all out from the very start*. Get ahead, stay ahead," Mia said in a bold voice loud enough for Ruby to hear.

Needless to say, this was a bluff. She was strategically lying through her teeth in an attempt to lure Ruby into dashing headfirst into her own ruin.

*Heh, I don't have to rack my brains this time. I just have to talk. Easy-peasy.*

And talk she did, rambling on and on about her plan to immediately leave Ruby in the dust. She even hummed a little song for effect. Interestingly, such a ploy wouldn't have been possible before, because Kuolan might have assumed she was giving it orders and actually done as she said. It wasn't like she could explain the concept of bluffing to the animal. Smart as it was, Kuolan was still a horse. She could hardly expect it

to comprehend the nuances of verbal stratagem, so she would have had to choose her words very carefully.

Not anymore though. Its intractably fiery spirit had somehow evaporated, leaving it a docile shadow of its former self. Nothing she said roused it. Neither encouragement nor provocation could elicit even a hint of competitive enthusiasm. So she was free to blab to her heart's content!

"All right, Kuolan. Listen up. We don't need to play fair. We just need to win. Winning is love! Winning is life! Winning is all that matters! Got it?" she declared. "It's all about the start, you hear? Victory will be decided at the outset, so go as fast as you can, as soon as you can, straight down this lane!"

She was signaling to Ruby that she saw no need to conform to the standard theory of holding back until the second half of the race. She was going to go full speed right out of the gate. As soon as she'd finished her sentence, Kuolan whinnied. Slowly, it craned its neck toward her and pulled its lips into a grin as if saying, "Gotcha, boss."

"...Hm?"

Mia suddenly got a bad feeling about her immediate future, but before she could dwell on this any further, she was signaled into position. Thus the two competitors lined up adjacent to one another, Mia atop Kuolan and Ruby atop Skyred Hare.

"So, Your Highness's strategy is to take the lead and hold it?" Ruby asked with an easy smile.

"Absolutely. I believe that in competitions like these, the most important thing is to secure an early lead."

"Hah. I didn't think you'd be so gutsy." Ruby narrowed her eyes at the course. "As for me...I'll be taking the slow and steady approach. Going too fast too early on a course like this will leave you struggling at the end..."

And so, Mia's strategy proved to be dead on arrival.

"Huh? Wait, what? You can't—"

"Competitors, on your marks! Get set! Go!"

A sharp voice and a quick swing of a flag signaled the start of the race. Before she could even process the shock of her failed ploy, the pair of horses burst into motion. Ruby's steed, true to her word, settled into a slower, more controlled pace. Its steps were steady and confident, showing no panic or doubt. Kuolan, on the other hand...

“Wha— Sto— No, Kuo—” Mia shouted falteringly, struggling to speak with the wind hammering her face.

True to *her* word, Kuolan broke at full speed. Faster, even. It broke at fuller, no, *fullest* speed.

“Too fast! You’re going too fast! Aaaaaaaaah!” she screamed in a voice of primal fear as her steed rampaged forward.

To her terror, it kept building speed. Within seconds, a large gap had formed between it and Skyred Hare.

*Augh, if we go this fast in the beginning, we’ll get tired and lose too much speed at the end. And that’s if we even reach the end! At this rate, we’re definitely going to trip over something!*

Then, Kuolan hit her with a double whammy of unexpected behavior.

“Wait, what are yo— No, not that way!”

She suddenly noticed that they were quickly approaching a large puddle of mud. It was, in fact, *that* puddle of mud. Indeed, Kuolan had charged diagonally down the course and was now in Skyred Hare’s lane. To an observer, Mia’s horse undoubtedly looked like it was out of control. This was extra baffling for her, considering she’d been getting pretty good at handling Kuolan recently. Her mind raced at the same speed as the blurring scenery.

“Wh-Why are you going out of your way to run in the harder lane?” she yelled in between shrieks of terror.

Kuolan glanced at her, blew some air out of its nose and, without any hesitation...dove straight into the mud!

“Gaaaaaaaaah!”

Gobs of muck and mire exploded upward as hooves slammed down. Mia stiffened and tightened her grip on the reins mere moments before Kuolan raised its rear. Its back pitched forward, sending her sliding toward its neck. The sudden motion almost sent her tumbling off, and only with a desperate effort did she manage to hang on. She caught a glimpse of the mud being kicked up by Kuolan’s powerful hind legs...as well as its *target*. A jet of brown splatters hit Ruby and Skyred Hare with an archer’s precision. The crimson horse neighed in dismay and slid to a stop, vision and momentum robbed simultaneously as slop blanketed its eyes. Ruby, an equal victim of the sludgy projectile, narrowly avoided being thrown off herself.

“Wh-What the...” Mia stammered in bewilderment before her mind caught up with her eyes and she realized what Kuolan was doing.

*The mad dash was so he can get in front of Skyred Hare and kick mud back at them? He must have been planning to do this from the very begi—Eeeeek! Kuolan?!*

That was all the thinking she managed to do before her steed accelerated again. Now it dodged all the puddles in front of it, swerving around some while leaping right across others, as it hurtled down the course at breakneck speed.

It was, frankly, an egregious display of unsportsmanlike conduct. After all, kicking mud at a rival competitor was pretty much the textbook definition of playing dirty. However, it wasn’t met with jeering from the crowd. Rather...

“Huh. Damn. You go, girl.”

Malong spoke for the vast majority of the spectators. To understand their reaction, one must consider the nature of horsemanship. What *was* horsemanship? Was it an aristocratic pastime? A sophisticated leisure activity for young noble girls? No! Certainly not! Horsemanship, at its core, was a martial skill. Meant to be employed in war, it sought first and foremost the defeat of an opponent. The point wasn’t simply to ride fast. It was to do everything possible to dismount one’s opponent. To win the engagement.

This essence had been lost on much of the audience, who’d shown up expecting to witness the genteel performance of an imperial princess and a duke’s daughter. It would, they’d figured, be a reserved affair in which a pair of refined-looking girls did some refined riding, weaving carefully around muddy areas and conserving their horses’ stamina until the home stretch, where the race would be decided by a straight line sprint. Clean, conventional, and wholly colorless. The *last* thing they were expecting was Mia’s near-suicidal gambit. To their further excitement, Ruby had shaken off the surprise attack and was now in fierce pursuit. The whole venue immediately began to buzz with energy.

“Now that’s some entertaining riding! My money’s on the princess!”

“Don’t rule out the Redmoon girl though. Look at how close she’s staying. It’s damn impressive. Some real dogged riding there.”

To their approving eyes, even Mia’s desperate shrieking and dodgy

riding—she frequently had to scramble to heave her rear back into the saddle after nearly being thrown off—seemed like a part of her strategy. It wasn't, of course. But anyway...

"Aha ha, it looks like Her Highness has got a few tricks up her sleeve," said Ruby, chuckling as she wiped the mud off her face. She licked her lips. "Yes... This is it. *This* is what I wanted."

Her heart was pounding. From exertion, yes, but far more from the elation of being able to fight for the one she loved.

*Unlike that time, when I couldn't...*

The words flitted through her mind, and then were gone. She frowned.

"That time? What...?"

She tried to chase the memory, but it had evaporated like a dream upon waking. All the details were gone. There was one thing she knew beyond a shadow of a doubt—the source of this burning impulsion within her was regret. Suddenly, she understood. Losing was painful, but not even getting the chance to fight was far worse. It was a strange insight, one she felt she'd known all along, and it put a euphoric smile on her face.

"Don't get too cocky, Your Highness, because this duel's just getting started. Let's go, Skyred Hare."

At her signal, her mount broke into a fierce dash. Despite its speed, its strides were light and graceful. Its reputation, as proven by this smooth gallop, was not undeserved. Like a red comet, it shot down the length of the course, evading mud puddles while continuing to accelerate. Onlooking eyes began to focus on its rider.

"That horse is a beauty, no doubt, but the young Redmoon is no slouch herself. That's some fine riding."

Impressed voices could be heard throughout the venue. Those who'd dismissed the event as a mere diversion for highborn daughters changed their tune after witnessing Ruby's skillful handling of Skyred Hare. Then there was Mia. Her embarrassingly high-pitched squealing had died down. Now she rode in dispassionate silence, paying no mind to Ruby's fast-closing form. She didn't panic. She didn't even seem to notice.

...Just to be clear, she didn't pass out or anything. Her eyes were focused intently forward, and her face was devoid of emotion. She was tranquility itself, the eye of a storm, riding with steady, impassive composure. This

change in mannerism was brought about by a realization that had dawned on her soon after the race began.

*This...is entirely out of my hands now, isn't it?*

When a man out to sea is caught in a storm, how does he fight the waves? The answer is simple: he does not. He *cannot*. Then what could Mia do to control the horse-shaped tempest that was Kuolan? Nothing. So what was she supposed to do? She had, in fact, already discovered the answer back during the summer—the back float! Man was powerless before Mother Nature. The fury of the open sea could be neither pacified nor conquered. When faced with a towering wave, one should not oppose it but rather relax and give in to its flow.

*That's right. I have no control, just like those moon jellyfish floating in the sea. In fact, I should learn from them. They definitely know what they're doing. Okay, think like jellyfish, be like jellyfish. I am jellyfish... I* am *jellyfish...*

And thus, she became one with the gelatinous moons of the sea. She was now Mia Luna Seamoon!

After allotting a portion of her mental resources to her continued mumbling of jellyfish-related incantations, she devoted all the rest to reading Kuolan's rhythm, working her own legs to match its strides. At last she'd discovered her ideal way to ride—total relinquishment of control. Her dream had always been to become the ultimate yes-man. To find people who could accomplish her goals and leave everything to them so she could relax in bed.

How would this apply to riding? In terms of racing, the goal was of course to cross the finish line before everyone else. So who was capable of doing this? In this respect, she now knew that she'd harbored a grave misunderstanding, thinking that *she* was the one who needed to accomplish this goal.

It was not so. In the Horsemanship Tournament, the one doing the running...was the horse. Horses knew how to run quickly. They knew far better than she. Her job, then, was to surrender control. The horse was the one who was good at running. She just had to let herself be taken along for the ride. And under no circumstances should she ever get in the horse's way.

So, Mia focused every last drop of her concentration on matching Kuolan's movements. Discordant motion would cause it to waste

momentum, so she tried her very best to avoid any such occurrence. This would also keep her from falling off, which was arguably even more important, because falling off seemed like it would hurt a lot!

She managed to finish most of the course using this hands-off approach. As she rounded the final bend of the first lap, she heard Ruby's voice.

"Better watch out, Your Highness."

Mia glanced sideways to find herself neck and neck with Ruby. She looked from her opponent to her red steed. Skyred Hare's face, now marred by splotches of mud, had lost all semblance of its prior regality. Its eyes flared with rage.

"It's my turn now," Ruby declared tersely.

The meaning of her words immediately dawned on Mia.

"Ah! They're going to ram— Eeeek!"

Her words were cut off by her own scream as she felt her body tilt. A split second later, there was a heavy impact, after which she saw Kuolan crane its neck toward her and peel its lips back in an incredibly smug grin. Indeed, the horse had seen that Skyred Hare intended to ram them and responded with a preemptive body slam of its own.

A strained grunt escaped Ruby as she righted herself.

"Hah, not bad. You play pretty rough."

The timing of the counterattack had been impeccable, striking Ruby's steed just as it shifted its body to attack. The surprise impact slowed Skyred Hare as it struggled to keep its balance. In the meantime, Kuolan charged forward, pulling away again.

When both competitors finished their first lap, the gap between them was two horse-lengths. Amidst the roaring of a thrilled crowd, the race entered its second and final lap!

Not far into the second half, Skyred Hare struck back with a revenge body slam. It had a similar effect, catching Kuolan off guard and sending it stumbling into a mud puddle. It splashed up, coating Mia's face.

"Gah!"

She shrieked, the jolt causing her balance to waver. In what seemed like a display of concern, Kuolan glanced back at her. Then it gave her another one of its horsey grins.

*Wait a minute... That's not a concerned face! That's a "You're still on, right? Because I'm just getting started" face!*

She immediately tightened her grip on the reins at the realization. A moment later, she felt all the muscles in Kuolan's back tense. Skyred Hare leaned in for another hit, but Kuolan took it head-on, turning it into a shoving match. Unprepared to wrestle, Skyred Hare broke from the engagement. Undeterred, it came in for another strike. Kuolan met it again. And again. And again. The two horses slammed into each other three times, sending viscous shockwaves up through their riders.

"Ugh!"

Ruby winced, struggling to control her mount as wind blew drops of glistening sweat off her forehead. Mia, meanwhile, did the exact opposite. Having mastered the Way of the Seamoon, she entered Jellyfish Stance and employed the first of its ultimate techniques: pass-through! As the president of the student council, a great variety of issues would end up at her desk. Each time one did, she would hand it off to someone else with practiced efficiency, the motion as natural as breathing.

It was almost as if the documents had never stopped at her desk in the first place. They simply *passed through* her. Reports from Chloe would flow straight to Rafina. Documents from Sapphias landed right in Sion's hands. Then, when the receiving party came back with a solution, all she would do is smash the metaphorical like button on their response and send it off. From left to right and east to west, things just kept flowing right through her, propelled by her masterful usage of pass-through. Like clothes on a line or a petal in the wind, she bent and swayed with the flow, her lithe form offering no friction or resistance.

Met with the violent jolt of colliding animals, she did the same, her limp body twisting and turning like a ragdoll as the force of the impacts passed through her. This (situationally, depending on the perspective) graceful method of riding wowed the audience and elicited gasps of admiration.

"Go Princess Mia! Go Princess Mia!"

Synchronized cheering reached her ears. She glanced sideways to find her group of makeshift cheerleaders yelling encouragement at her. Their efforts had prompted a number of spectators to join in. As she passed in front of them, she took one hand off the reins and waved. This cocky gesture of composure elicited an even louder round of enthused roars from

the crowd.

...Obviously, Mia was not actually being cocky. After all, she could hardly flaunt her composure when she didn't have a shred of it left. The hand in the air was, in fact, waving of its own accord! Having slipped from the reins, it fluttered in the wind, fingers too weak to ball into a fist, and she was desperately trying to pull it back down.

*Eeeeek! Help! Help! I'm going to fall! I'm going to faaaaall!*

She stared with desperate, teary eyes at the back of Kuolan's head, focusing every remaining speck of concentration on a single point, hoping to get its attention. In that moment, she had indeed become the princess with the high-powered gaze. Suddenly, Kuolan looked back toward her.

*Oh thank the moons! I got through to it!*

A moment's reprieve from anxiety. Then, that horsey grin again. It seemed to say, "Yeah, yeah, I know. Win by any means necessary, right? Just leave it to me. I'll show you what real speed looks like."

Which was pretty much the exact opposite of what she wanted to convey.

*Nope, I didn't! I didn't get through to it at all! Eeeeeeeek!*

As a fresh round of tears further clouded her vision, she heard Ruby's voice beside her.

"So, are you done? If you've got no more tricks, then I'll just go ahead and win this race," Ruby declared with supreme confidence.

*I have to give it to you. You put up a good fight. But this is it. The race is mine, Your Highness...* thought Ruby as she eyed her opponent.

The two horses were almost neck and neck. The stage was set for her to come from behind and win. They'd just cleared the last bend, and it was now a straight dash to the finish line. In a contest of pure speed, she had every advantage. She'd always planned to win through this final stretch. Though she'd fallen behind earlier, she knew this was where she could turn the tide. Having caught up right as they reached this last leg of the race, she felt a surge of confidence in her victory...followed by a rush of doubt.

This was her chance. Her golden opportunity. But it was...too golden. Could a race like this really work out so perfectly in the home stretch? Through her education in military tactics, Ruby knew that the world would, on very rare occasions, see the rise of a special kind of genius who could

have their opponents believing confidently in their victory every step of the way...to their own demise. The mind-bending prowess of these wizards of strategy dotted the pages of history, each brilliant ploy a work of art unto itself.

Ruby knew that the strategy of true genius was subtle. She also knew that the girl beside her was Mia Luna Tearmoon, whom a number of influential people revered as the "Great Sage of the Empire." Finally, she saw that Mia's eyes were fixed intently on her own horse. There was no hint of defeat in those eyes.

*Sh— That's her plan!*

The revelation of her own failure came woefully late. She'd played completely into Mia's bluff. A contest of pure speed favored Skyred Hare. Therefore her opponent had forgone such a contest, trying instead to win through trickery and mayhem by launching surprise attacks, hence the mud-slinging and tackling. But what if that fundamental assumption was false?

*What if her horse's top speed is only a little slower than mine? Or...the same? Then her horse would have been running exactly the way she planned, while we'd have spent the whole race dealing with their disruptions. Who would be more exhausted by the end?*

In that case, the events of the race so far would not have been an attempt to close the gap between their horses' potential for a slim chance to win...but a methodical scheme to seal victory.

Ruby swallowed as the race neared its end.

...For the record, if we were to apply Ruby's logic, then Mia, who'd been dealing with nonstop environmental disruptions since the race began, should be the most exhausted of the four of them. All that pass-throughing took a heavy toll.

"I... I can't... No more... Can't hold reins... Going to fall..."

Her teary whimpers were mercilessly drowned out by the thunderous cheers of the crowd.

# Chapter 23: The Moment of Truth Is Upon Us! Their Hearts Become One! ...Maybe?

At some invisible signal—or perhaps it was an instinctual response—both horses accelerated at the same time. Their powerful legs kicked at the ground, sending up large splatters of mud.

*Craaack!*

Ruby's crop lashed out at Skyred Hare's rear, urging it to run faster.

*Craaack!*

Mia's reins lashed out at the open air, urging her to keep a better grip on them lest they escape her entirely.

"Go, Skyred! Gooooo! Faster! Faster!"

Ruby's powerful voice echoed through the stands.

*Eeeeeeek! I'm going to fall! I'm falling!*

Mia's pitiful voice echoed in her heart.

Her body swayed wildly from side to side. Her feet were barely in the stirrups. Time and again, she came within a hair's breadth of toppling off. She'd tried multiple times to slow the horse, but her desperate signaling had no effect on its blistering speed. Now a sniveling mess, her eyes watering and nose running, she gritted her teeth and tried very hard to tell herself *this is fine*.

What would happen if she were to slow down right now? Doubtlessly, the future foretold by the Princess Mia Chronicles would arrive unchanged. If she ran from this fight... If she allowed her mind to focus on fleeing even in the face of certain tragedy, then surely, she would never be able to stop running away, no matter the circumstances...

*That's right...I have to win this fight. I'm going to win, and then I'll grow as a person. That's why I have to keep up this spee— Ah, never mind. I can't do this. Stop! Stoooop!*

...She tried telling Kuolan to stop, but it refused to listen. She tried telling herself to buck up and tough it out, but she refused to listen as well. Already past her limit and blinded by her own tears, the only thing keeping her from full-blown panic was her own exhaustion. The finish line neared. Only half of the last straight stretch remained. It was coming down to the wire with Kuolan maintaining the slightest of leads.

"No more... Can't... I'm going to... Urrk..."

Her whimper was followed by a retch. Something sour filled her mouth. The world was a blur, and she felt like she was spinning in circles. Kuolan's ear twitched. It shot a quick glance in her direction. She saw the concern in its eyes, along with an implicit "I'll stop if you really can't take it anymore. Want me to?" Well, she thought she did, anyway. Despite being in the midst of the frantic final sprint, her steed was still considerate enough to spare a thought for her. This whole race, Kuolan had tried its best. How, then, could she not do the same?

Quietly, she closed her eyes. The days she'd spent with Kuolan resurfaced in her mind. She remembered all those times they'd run through this course together. All the times she'd tried to match his rhythm. And all those times she'd failed due to the profound discomfort of her rump.

Memories came one after another. She saw herself trying to pat Kuolan, him sneezing on her, him sneezing on her another time, him sneezing some more...on her... The nostalgia of their practice sessions, mucus and all, blossomed into a warm, fuzzy feeling. Granted, there had been many occasions where she felt like Kuolan was amusing himself at her expense. Nevertheless, she trusted that he had always been looking out for her, as evidenced by the fact that she'd never suffered any significant injuries riding him. Serious mode Kuolan was no joke. Had he given her no consideration, she'd have fallen off countless times by now.

*Surely, he's been watching out for me all this time, and I just didn't realize it.*

With that thought in mind, the days they'd spent practicing together suddenly seemed like times of great fun. Visions of bygone days flashed before her eyes, the memories rosy and sparkling...and flashing in a manner uncannily similar to the way they allegedly did when one was about to meet their end. But anyway, disregarding that particular observation... Those memories were now precious to her, and if today was the fruit of their

shared travails, then stopping was simply not an option.

So she forced the words out of her in a strained voice.

“We’re in the home stretch! Give it all you’ve got!” she shouted. “Go for it, Kuolan! Do... Do whatever it takes to win!”

Just as she spoke, a young horse somewhere neighed, its voice coinciding with her own. Kuolan, seemingly cued by the sound, accelerated.

*Go, Kuolan! Let's win this!*

Mia felt herself become one with her horse as they dashed down the course. The experience was moving. Profound, even. At last, she thought, she understood what people meant when they talked about riders connecting with their horses—when their hearts and spirits touched. Behind her she could feel Skyred Hare's rough breathing. The steady sound of its steps told her it was keeping up. Normally, this kind of pressure would have made her hurl...again, but now, she was perfectly calm.

"You won't lose to a horse like *that*, right, Kuolan?"

A vigorous whinny answered her call. It seemed to say, "You bet I won't! We're going to run all the way to victory! And then we'll keep running! As far as we want, to our hearts' content into the great beyond!"

In that moment, she was gripped by the liberating impression that so long as Kuolan was with her, she could go wherever she wished and as far as she wanted. He would take her to the very ends of the earth and over!

"Ah—"

But her epiphanous moment didn't last. She suddenly realized the finish line was retreating behind her.

"Ah..."

A second later, the silence of concentration broke, and the sounds of the venue came rushing back. It was deafening. Throngs of spectators had exploded into roars. Amidst the rumbling symphony of excitement, she heard the voices of her cheering squad. They screamed her name, extolling her victory.

"I... I won?"

Gaping at her surroundings, her wide, disbelieving eyes eventually settled on the sight of her friends waving at her. They wore wide smiles.

"...I won! I did it! I really won!" she exclaimed, throwing her hands up in the air in a reflexive gesture of excitement.

She then waved said hands at her friends. She waved and waved, for only through such vigorous waving could she convey her elation. Needlessly to say, during this process, the reins were entirely removed from her palms.

“...Oh?”

She felt an odd sensation. It was as if her weight had abruptly taken leave of her. And so it had, for she’d forgotten a crucial fact. After two whole laps at a full gallop, she’d gotten so used to Kuolan’s breakneck speed that she mistook a slowing of its pace after it passed the finish line as an actually slow pace. It wasn’t; she was still going very fast. Physics therefore dictated that should her steed suddenly stop, she would continue forward at her considerable velocity without it. Therefore...

“Oh? Oh?”

The world spun in a circle as the form of Kuolan, its motion ceased after digging its hooves into the ground, began to shrink from her view.

And that was how Mia experienced flight. Again.

“...Eh?”

Mia soared through the air with mouth agape. A figure blew past her, a gale to her breeze, and intersected her trajectory.

“Gotcha. Careful, miss.”

Lin Malong, who’d been waiting near the finish line, had snapped his horse into action, matching the speed of her parabolic flight to catch her in his arms like a professional catcher of flying girls. He tucked her against his side and rode out the rest of the momentum with another lap around the course.

“You can’t be letting go of your reins and looking around when you’re on a horse, miss. Distracted riding is dangerous. People’ll start wondering what I’m teaching you.”

Mia’s shoulders slumped at his rightful admonishment.

“I’m terribly sorry. That was indeed very foolish of me...” she said, looking like a scolded puppy.

Her awkward victory lap did not, however, dampen the crowd’s enthusiasm, and they continued to root loudly for her.

After reaching the finish line for a third time, Mia’s feet finally felt solid earth beneath them.

“Well, that was certainly humiliating. Ugh...” she grumbled.

Her expression brightened a little as she looked around for her trusty

steed.

“I must admit though, that was a lot of fun. Especially in those last moments when it was like...Kuolan and I became one. I wanted him to go faster, and he just knew. We *connected*. I need to give him a pat and tell him he did a great job.”

A quick scan of the venue revealed a trio of horses near the goal.

“Oh?”

One of them was Kuolan’s boss, Kayou, who’d come to watch the race. Beside her was her little foal. The third was Kuolan himself, who was rubbing himself against the other two in a decidedly affectionate fashion. It almost looked like the three were a loving family.

“Hey, Kuolan. Good job. Glad you got to show off to your wife and kid, aren’t you?” said Malong, patting each of them in turn.

“...Say what?”

Mia’s jaw hung open as she stared at Kuolan, whose tail was swinging happily from side to side.

*A-Ah... Well, I suppose that makes sense. That little horse does resemble Kuolan,* she thought, reluctantly working through the logic.

“Hm? That reminds me... That spot where he sped up during the race...wasn’t that where Kayou and her baby were standing? And when he moved his head...was he actually looking at them? Did he try so hard at the end because he wanted to impress his family?”

It was an idea that she pondered only for a brief moment before dismissing it.

“N-No way. I’m being silly. Kuolan and I definitely became one with each other. We won because our hearts were conjoined. Mm hm.”

She had a feeling that no joy would come of contemplating the possibility further, so she scrunched it up and pitched it over her horizon of memories which, conveniently, doubled as a horizon of thought.

*Kayou... Here I was thinking you’re the future me, but you have terrible taste in men,* she thought, gazing at the female horse with a sense of pity.

Kayou tilted her head as though puzzled by the look. Then...

“Hm?”

Mia felt the familiar sensation of a cool breeze on the back of her neck.

“D-Don’t tell me...”

She turned around to find herself staring down the twin barrels of

Kuolan’s mucus launchers. They flared.

“E-Eeeeeeek!”

And that is the story of how Mia won the race in triumphant fashion. The exact degree of triumphant-ness was perhaps debatable.

# Chapter 24: Romance Mode Engaged! All Systems Are Go!

As she passed over the finish line, Ruby quietly closed her eyes. The roar of the crowd filled her ears. Amidst their thunderous cheers, she slowly opened her eyes...to the sight of Mia ahead of her.

It was over. She didn't make it. All that remained was to watch the petite form of her opponent pull away into the distance.

*So that's it... I've lost.*

It took some time for the reality to sink in, but she was ready for it. She...was supposed to be ready. No regrets. She'd told herself so. After all, she'd done everything in her power, pushing her limits as much as time and her body would allow. She'd tried her absolute best...and lost. The chance had been given to her. She'd been able to fight—really fight, with all her heart and soul—for the one she loved. That was a wonderful thing. A blessing. So she had no cause for regret. No reason...to despair...

"It...was a good fight. Definitely a good fight. And a fight has a loser. And sometimes, it'll be me. I know how it works. I—"

Her voice cracked. She drew in a faltering breath.

"I... I can handle losing. I'm..."

Words melted into desperate gasps. Her diaphragm betrayed her, convulsing of its own accord. Her breaths came shorter, faster, squeezing the air from her lungs. The scenery around her took on a kaleidoscopic sparkle before dissolving into a bleary sea of color. Drops fell from her eyes, one after another. She rubbed at them vigorously, *desperately*, but they would not stop.

Ruby cried. With the open, honest sorrow of a young girl who'd lost something dear to her, she cried.

*Hnnngh, I'm the one who won! Me! So how come I have to suffer like this?*

Not only had she gone for a victory lap sack-of-potatoes style, she'd taken another one of Kuolan's nasal cannons to the face. Cursing this bitter sequence of events, she plodded toward the changing tent.

"You were amazing, milady! Absolutely amazing! Don't worry. I'll get you cleaned up and looking pretty again in no time!"

"Right, thanks, Anne... Ugh, my hair..."

As she walked, she noticed Ruby in the distance. She was turned with her back to Mia.

*Hm... I might have embarrassed myself a tad in the process, but a win is a win. She can't pester me about Sir Vanos anymore. She might not like it, but she'll just have to suck it up and deal.* Mia pressed her fists to her hips and humphed. *This was all her fault anyway. If she hadn't dragged me into this whole fiasco, I wouldn't have had to suffer the shame of...all this! I need to get this off my chest! All right Ruby, brace yourself, because it's time for me to do some gloating!*

Hoping to smug away her frustrations, she approached Ruby, circling around her so she could get up in her face.

"Who—"

The rest of her sentence lodged in her throat. Ruby was sobbing like her heart was breaking.

*Huh? Excuse me? What— Why is this girl crying?!*

Mia was utterly confused. Worse yet...

"The way Her Highness rode that horse was incredible."

"It certainly was. What a race. She never fails to impress."

...Her ears astutely picked out the approaching voices of Tion and Rafina. The timing was impeccable. Impeccably bad, that is.

*Uh oh! If I'm seen with Ruby like this, everyone will think I made her cry! I'll look like some sort of vicious bully!*

She made a snap decision to grab Ruby's hand and pull her toward the nearby changing tent.

"Okay, come on, this way. In you go."

Fortunately, the only other girl who'd entered the tournament was Malong's sister, so the changing tent was effectively a private space for the time being.

"Anne, could I ask you to stand guard outside and make sure no one comes in?"

It never hurts to be extra safe though. After Anne nodded and left the tent, Mia turned toward Ruby. She'd stopped sobbing, but her face was still a tear-streaked mess. Not that Mia looked any better, mind you. The fact that the dried fluid covering Ruby's face was at least of human origin might have actually given her the upper hand in the "who's less dirty" contest.

"Anyway, here. Wipe your face first," she said, handing Ruby a small towel as she contemplated the reason for the girl's tears.

*Ah, who am I kidding. As if I need to do much contemplation. The answer is pretty obvious. After all, when it comes to topics like these, I can be pretty perceptive, if I do say so myself.*

It should be noted that lately Mia had been hooked on a romance novel she'd borrowed from Chloe. All that reading had left her feeling like she was a veritable relationship expert. Faced with this situation, her brain immediately flipped into romance mode, allowing her to identify with practiced precision the romantic conflict present in the current scenario. She knew exactly why Ruby had been crying!

"Ruby, correct me if I'm wrong, but...you have a crush on Sir Vanos, don't you?"

Then, in one of those moments of dispassionate objectivity people sometimes have after spending too much time in one particular frame of mind, she mentally backtracked on her own deduction.

*Eh, that's probably going a bit too far,* she thought with a wry smile. *I'm pretty sure he's single, but there's such a large age gap, not to mention a status gap... Also, that face of his... I mean,* I *know he's a nice guy, but there's a tad too much "bandit" in his features...*

Upon reconsideration, Mia decided that it was probably the frustration and disappointment of losing that had made Ruby cry. In that case, the suggestion about her crush on Vanos would sound ridiculous, but she figured it'd work as an icebreaker of sorts, so long as Ruby took it as a stupid joke.

Ruby did not take it as a stupid joke.

"...You're truly as sharp as they say. How did you know?"

Instead, she nodded gently. The sight of her deepening blush sent Mia to her feet.

"Wait, what?!" Mia exclaimed, shocked by this unexpected turn of events.

Then, realizing that her reaction was at odds with her previous statement, she tried to justify it.

"Uh, I mean, I thought as much, but I'm surprised you admitted to it. It's, uh, pretty brave of you to...you know, do that..."

While attempting to present some semblance of logical coherence, she inwardly revised her own understanding of the situation.

*So what's going on is Ruby has a crush on Vanos, and I'm...standing in her way? Wait, am* I *the villain here? Hm... How do these situations usually work out?* Mia consulted her mental literary repository. *Uh oh. Based on my research, people who interfere with other people's love tend to get kicked by horses.*

She looked around nervously at what was doubtlessly the densest concentration of equine hooves on the island right now. Though this was a piece of knowledge she'd gained from Chloe-suggested romance novels, its dubious real world application did not stop a chill from shooting up her spine.

*A-And...didn't the villain get stabbed at the end of that one book?*

If Ruby, with her extensive training in swordsmanship, decided to express her dissatisfaction in a similar fashion, Mia wouldn't stand a chance. An uneasy glance in Ruby's direction revealed a pair of bloodshot eyes, though there appeared to be no resentment in them.

*I'm pretty sure they're red right now because of the crying...but I can totally see the day when it's because she's out for my blood!*

Mia remembered how, in her past life, she'd gone to request reinforcements from the Redmoons during the revolution, only to be turned away. If the reason for their reluctance had been Vanos's death...

*It would all make sense. If she blamed me for the Sealence Forest incident, then she'd definitely hold a grudge. That's probably why she refused to help.*

With romance mode acting as mental lubrication, Mia's brain spun and spun, weaving isolated events into a web of logical connections. At its center lay Ruby; she was the source, and everything had revolved around her tragic love. Emboldened by this completely unprecedented insight, she continued to explore its implications.

*So she denied my request for help to avenge the man she loved...even if it would lead to her own ruin... Love before life. The body may die, but the heart must see devotion to its conclusion... Moons, that's such a roman— I mean dangerous attitude!*

Figuring it was too risky to leave Ruby in her current state, she took a moment to compose her thoughts before speaking.

"Ruby Etoile Redmoon. You've made me a promise, and I shall see it kept."

Ruby's shoulders shuddered. Mia paid it no mind.

"Your sword, please," she said, holding out her hand.

Was she confiscating the sword of a potentially murderous individual? Symbolically depriving an audacious noble of her pride? No, not at all. In demanding the sword, she sought to acquire not only the weapon but its wielder as well.

"I will have you pledge it to me, so that I may entrust you with the maintenance of the Princess Guard."

"...Huh?"

Ruby blinked in utter confusion.

"You shall be appointed adjutant," Mia continued in the solemn tone of royal decree, "to the current captain, Sir Vanos. I expect you to assist him in the operation and supervision of the Princess Guard."

In declaring so, she'd made a split-second calculation. Ruby could still be a Chaos Serpent. She didn't want to think the girl's tears were a lie, but

she understood that such a performance would be well within the capabilities of a Serpent. Given that fact...

*I need to weigh the risk of Ruby already being a Serpent against the chances of her becoming one in the future. This calls for extreme discretion...*

If she were to take away Ruby's sword and in the process pull her and Vanos apart, she'd surely leave her utterly heartbroken. Would the Chaos Serpents ignore a soul so vulnerable and ripe for the plucking? Unlikely.

*The House of Redmoon holds a lot of sway in the military. If the Serpents are trying to unravel the empire from the inside, Ruby would be an extremely convenient pawn.*

Having Ruby become a Serpent while holding a grudge against her was just about the worst possible outcome. What if she instead placed Ruby close to Vanos then? Assuming the Serpents hadn't yet gotten to her, such an arrangement would be a strong impediment against future attempts to snake their way into her mind. On top of that, she'd have done her a massive favor!

If Ruby *was* already a Serpent though, and she was lying about her crush on Vanos to sneak into Mia's faction...

*It's the same situation I faced with Sapphias... Better to keep her at Vanos's side so he can keep an eye on her. That way, if she really is a snake, her hands will be tied.*

Since she'd claimed to be in love with Vanos, she'd have to stay close to him to keep up the pretense. Effectively, she'd be stuck under constant surveillance because her facade left her no room to complain.

*That's definitely better than letting her run free. It's easier to deal with someone when I already have reins on them.*

That was the gist of her split-second calculation. However, there was an underlying factor that influenced all of her considerations—she had every intention of seeing this love between Ruby and Vanos take shape. Why, you ask?

*Love across class lines...is absolutely delicious!*

Because Mia was a burgeoning romance nerd, and she had a thing for cross-class relationships. One of the novels she'd borrowed from Chloe had been a dramatic love story between a knight and a princess, and her mouth watered at the thought of witnessing one play out in real life. From a front

row seat, to boot!

*I* have *to see this!*

At the end of the day, all that logic and calculation was really just rationalizing her craving for romantic melodrama.

Meanwhile, Ruby was still trying to wrap her brain around what was happening.

"Appoint me...to the Princess Guard?"

Mia nodded.

"That's right. Just between us, Ruby, I plan to have the Princess Guard take on some very important duties in the future. They won't just be in charge of my safety. I want them to be my hands and feet. A personal army at my command."

Back during the great famine, the food transports that Ludwig worked so hard to prepare and dispatch were frequently raided before reaching their destination. Hungry masses and starving soldiers became bandits that attacked supply wagons. Sometimes the transport guards themselves went rogue and made off with the food. Every betrayal left Mia wishing more fervently for trustworthy troops.

*Ah, I wish I had a reliable squad I could rely on... Troops who won't betray me and always do their job properly.*

To live without worrying about the possibility of betrayal at every turn was, she'd realized, a great luxury. Knowing this, she'd been wondering if there was any way to use her most trusted soldiers, the Princess Guard, to protect those valuable food transports when they became necessary.

*It'd be very nice if I could get Ruby involved... Very nice indeed. With her on board, it might even be possible to convince the Redmoons to send troops from their elite private army.*

Those reinforcements she so desperately needed in the previous timeline...might actually be available to her now.

*Granted, I'm getting a little ahead of myself. Who knows if things will work out that well. For now, I get to see how this romance between Vanos and Ruby plays out, and that's enough for me! Oho ho, I can hardly wait!* she thought, grinning as she entertained fantasies about the pair's potential developments.

The Empress of Tearmoon, Mia Luna Tearmoon, is known to be a

person of many friends. When listing her closest, those frequently named include Saint Rafina Orca Belluga, the Etoiline Esmeralda Greenmoon, Chloe of Forkroad & Co., as well as the Outcount Rudolvon's daughter, Tiona Rudolvon. Despite their disparate backgrounds, these women forged true friendships with Empress Mia.

What of her closest sworn allies then? Those whose bond to her was maintained not only through friendship but also a pledge of honor? Though opinions are doubtlessly varied, I submit for your consideration, dear reader, the name of Ruby Etoile Redmoon.

Born into the House of Redmoon, the daughter of one of Tearmoon's renowned Four Dukes, pedigree alone should have been sufficient to guarantee her a page in the annals of history. But as you are surely aware, her fame derives not from her privileged birth but from her role as the first woman in Tearmoon history to serve as the Ebony Moon Minister. As the head of the Ebony Moon Ministry, which oversees military affairs, her extensive utilization of her family's influence, along with the cooperation she enjoyed from Grand General Dion Alaia, allowed her to institute significant reforms in the imperial army. By doing away with the inefficiencies of old customs and implementing new, effective systems that conformed to contemporary circumstances, she breathed new life into Tearmoon's military and contributed in no small measure to Empress Mia's overarching reformation of the empire.

Interestingly, exactly how she became so involved with military affairs remains a mystery to this day. Though the House of Redmoon has historically had strong ties with the Ebony Moon Ministry, why the daughter of their duke chose to throw herself into the ruthless world of war and bloodshed is a question with no clear answer, for there are no records of her rationale. Based on the fact that her soldiering life began in the Princess Guard, it seems reasonable to assume that the arrangement is at least partially attributable to the will of the then-Princess Mia, but this is and likely forever will be mere speculation.

There exists a second mystery surrounding her, and it involves her husband. Specifically, the perplexing dearth of information about the man. Aside from the empress herself, the Four Dukes are Tearmoon's highest-ranking nobles. It seems unthinkable for the name of one of their sons-in-law to be missing from historical records, and yet, that is what we are faced

with.

One theory is that of a May-December romance, wherein she took a soldier of common birth as husband and devoted herself to him for life. Despite the vast disparity in their ages and social statuses, the theory claims that the private blessings of Empress Mia and her friends gave the pair the backing necessary to pursue their love. This is, of course, entirely ludicrous, but the very existence of such speculation speaks to the sheer fascination that the mystery has given rise to. I suspect it is the fact that all three of her sons grew to be men of great stature yet no contemporary male noble of similar height befitting her rank seemed to exist which gave rise to this enduring piece of folklore.

—An excerpt from a historian's essay

# Chapter 25: Of Inflations and Influencers

“What magic is this?”

Tucked away in a corner of the Golden Moon Ministry building was Ludwig’s office, where he currently sat reading a report sent him by Mia.

“She...won over Duke Redmoon’s daughter?”

Ludwig leaned back in his chair after perusing its contents and let out a long breath in astonishment.

“Her charisma truly knows no bounds...” he murmured, gazing up at the ceiling. “Yes, yes... It all makes sense. If Ruby becomes our ally, we’ll have a much easier time pushing reforms through the military. And... Ah, of course. She’s also eyeing the possibility of bolstering the Princess Guard. I do wonder how she managed to get the young Redmoon on board. I should ask her about it...”

The thought of gaining some insight into the hidden engine of Mia’s intellect—to see her genius methods in action—made him grin like a daydreaming schoolboy. As someone with a constant thirst for knowledge, his fantasies often involved situations that would quench it. Clearly, the inflation rate of the MG (Mia’s Greatness) Index was steady and positive. In other words, all was well on planet Ludwig. Furthermore...

“I know! Once I ask her about it, I’ll enlighten Balthazar the next time we get a drink. No, not just Balthazar. I’ll get the master to come too. In fact, I might as well round up the whole crew. No self-respecting disciple of Galvanus can resist hearing about something like this. Then, they’ll go and spread this knowledge to even more people...”

...He immediately began thinking of ways to increase his outreach like a true influencer. The more people he could pull into his camp (read: down his rabbit hole), the better. Ludwig was truly ahead of his time.

“Well well well, someone’s enjoying themselves.”

A chuckling voice sounded from the door. He looked up to find Dion

Alaia leaning against the frame.

"Wanna share that with the men too? The Guard's always dying for more stories about the princess."

As was becoming a daily norm, Dion strolled into Ludwig's office for "official military business." Which, of course, was Dion-speak for "slacking off." After being relieved of his post as hundred-man squad captain, he was now working at the Ebony Moon Ministry as a class three military official. In other words, a bureaucrat.

Broadly speaking, the Tearmoon military was composed of two organizations. One was the imperial army, the boots-on-the-ground people, essentially. The other oversaw the planning, logistics, staffing, and all other relevant affairs involved in putting the right boots on the right pieces of ground. That was the Ebony Moon Ministry. Dion used to belong to the former. Currently, he was employed by the latter. His transfer away from the front lines into a desk job was an established practice within the Tearmoon military.

In the past, there had been knights whose prowess on the battlefield had earned them promotions into commanding positions. As generals, they then issued foolish orders that resulted in the army suffering massive losses. Competence as a soldier did not guarantee competence as a commander. Learning from these costly lessons, the Tearmoon Empire decided to implement prerequisite administrative experience for higher-ranking commanding positions. Thousand-man squadron generals—a step above hundred-man squad captains—could not be promoted further until they'd spent some time in the Ebony Moon Ministry learning about army operation, supply line logistics, and strategic planning. After they'd acquired the ability to look at the bigger picture of warfare, they could then return to the front lines to shoulder the responsibilities of high command.

Dion, for his part, had deemed ministry work "murderously boring" and had entertained no plans to climb the chain of command any further, but at Mia's (Ludwig-conceived and Ludwig-voiced) behest, he'd reluctantly agreed to the reassignment. By all measures, he was getting ahead in life, but you wouldn't know it from his constant grumbling.

"She always keeps you guessing, doesn't she?" Dion quipped with a shrug. "Life has a tendency to take unexpected turns when the princess is around. Who'd have thought I'd one day dirty the floors of the Ebony Moon

Ministry?" he said with a sardonic snort.

"True..." Ludwig nodded deeply. "This does mean, however, that we might be able to send you back to the front lines."

Dion had two possible paths ahead of him. He could either return to the imperial army as a general to lead larger units of troops, or remain here as a military official and have a voice in the organizational affairs of the army as a whole. What Ludwig had wanted was a reliable channel to the Ebony Moon Ministry, that is, a friendly high-ranking military official. If the House of Redmoon's backing could serve the same purpose, however, the role required of Dion would change. Once they had reliable clout within the ministry, the influence of his physical presence on troops in the field would be far more important.

"Yeah, I guess I would appreciate that," said Dion, his tone still wry, but Ludwig's next comment made his brows quirk.

"Also, I believe we might need to change your priorities a tad. Promotions, I think...can wait."

"...All right, I'm listening."

"There's something else that needs to be done right now, and I suspect it's best if you handle it..."

"'Something else,' huh?" Dion leaned against the wall and crossed his arms. His expression sobered a little. "The Yellowmoons," he said, sure enough of his guess to not even bother glancing at Ludwig's nod. "Any movement from them? Been a while since the summer."

"I have people looking into it, but, so far, nothing. They're staying put. They're staying so put that it's honestly a little suspicious."

"Gotta expect Ganudos to have sent them word already. Unless they're feeling up for an open rebellion, I guess their hands are tied at the moment."

"Indeed, and their increased caution means we'll need to dig deeper for information. Fortunately, it's possible to leave the academy city project to my master and have Balthazar handle financial reform. In other words, it just so happens that I can free up my schedule right now."

Dion snorted in friendly derision.

"'It just so happens'? You're not exactly a 'just so happens' guy. You sure you're not confusing causation with correlation?"

"I see you've been doing some reading." A hint of a smile touched the corners of Ludwig's lips before he shrugged casually. "Indeed, a common

source of uncertainty in academia, and one we'll simply have to live with."

Dion snorted again.

"Sure, whatever you say."

"In any case, while we know that the Yellowmoons are likely in bed with the Chaos Serpents, it appears that Her Highness is averse to officially denouncing the entire house. Presumably she wishes to avoid harming those who are not directly involved. To that end, she has entrusted us with the task of carrying out this investigation. You and I, Sir Dion, must live up to that trust and deliver to Her Highness the information she seeks." Ludwig propped up the bridge of his glasses and looked straight at Dion. "Will I have your full cooperation in this matter?"

"The House of Yellowmoon...the oldest of all the noble lines..." Dion humphed. "Maybe they'll manage to send some assassins worth my time." He smiled wolfishly.

The pages of Tearmoon's secret history were soon to be laid bare.

# Side Chapter: Bel and Her Small Piece of Happiness III

The lamp flickered, its feeble light offering only paltry resistance against the encroaching darkness. Weak though it was, Bel loved to watch the tiny flame dance as she lay in bed, the covers pressing down on her as heavy and gentle as sleep upon her eyelids. These idle moments were some of her favorite, for they heralded the coming of storytime.

"...Mother Elise, could you tell me a story?" asked Bel, gazing expectantly up at the profile of a face that glowed with kindness even in the dim light.

She knew that Elise had one more job she needed to finish—her written record of the Great Sage of the Empire, Mia Luna Tearmoon's achievements, so that future generations might learn of her great deeds. It was a very important job, one that Elise, and Anne too, valued more than anything else. Bel knew this. She knew she couldn't bother Elise while she was working. But this period just before bed was different. It was special. This was her time, her favorite time, when she was allowed to be just a little selfish.

"Hmm, let me think... What sort of story should I tell tonight...?"

As proof, not a hint of displeasure clouded Elise's features. She smiled at Bel's droopy eyes and sleepy tone, then gracefully rose from her desk and walked over to lay down beside her. Bel immediately snuggled up and wrapped herself around Elise's arm.

"Weren't we talking about Mia today? Oh, right, I told you about the things that she was good at. How she was a great swimmer, and rode horses well... Which means I certainly have to tell you this story too." She grinned at Bel like a child about to divulge a secret. "Did you know that she was a master of dancing too?"

Bel's petite head shook from side to side.

"...Dancing? Really?"

“Mm hm, dancing,” said Elise with a firm nod. “This is something you should remember, so listen carefully. Her blood runs in you, which makes you a princess. For princesses, ballroom dancing is not just a hobby, but a tool and weapon. Mia used her skill in dancing to charm many lords and leaders into yielding her the advantage in negotiations.”

Then, she closed her eyes for a quiet moment and looked into the past.

“Mia’s dancing was a beautiful thing to witness. The way she’d glide and twirl, it was mesmerizing. Plenty of people said it was like seeing the moon goddess descend from the heavens. There was this one time when I was invited to an imperial ball, and I saw her dance there. She was such a radiant figure on the dance floor. She literally glowed.”

Not yet capable of picking truth from exaggeration, Bel gasped in genuine awe.

“Wow... I wish I could have seen her too.”

Her excited smile contrasted with the melancholic furrow across Elise’s brow.

“If she was still alive, I’m sure she’d be teaching you to dance too. If only Anne or I knew how...”

To Elise’s regret, neither she nor her sister knew enough about dancing to give instruction on performing at a stately gathering.

“Oh, but what about Ludwig? Maybe we can ask him. Goodness, you’re an imperial princess, and you haven’t even been taught to dance. What am I doing...?”

“Don’t say that, Mother Elise.”

She looked up, surprised at first by the strength in Bel’s voice, then the seriousness of her expression.

“I’m very happy here.” The young girl wore a glowing smile. “My life is filled with happiness every day. Mother Anne comes to wake me up, I get to eat tasty food, Mr. Ludwig gives me lessons, Mr. Eugen takes me home...”

She counted her happinesses on her fingers, listing her small blessings one after another.

“I love hearing your stories, Mother Elise,” she continued. “The ones about Grandmother Mia, the ones you wrote yourself... I love all of them. I’m a little disappointed I didn’t get to learn how to dance from Grandmother Mia, and not being able to see mother anymore makes me feel lonely...but I’m still very happy, so please, don’t be sad.”

Her words made Elise's chest tighten, regret compounded by pity.

*She's still so young... At her age, she should be asking for love and attention, but instead, she's looking out for our feelings while enduring all this hardship...*

Elise squeezed her eyes shut. A few seconds later, her smile resurfaced.

"Back to the story then. Where was I... Right, Mia and her dancing."

She told the story in a bright voice. Bright enough to keep Bel from worrying. Soon she heard the soft rhythmic breathing of slumber. Trailing off, she watched the sleeping child's placid expression in silence for a while. Then, placing a gentle palm on Bel's cheek, she whispered, "Good night, Bel. Sweet dreams."

It was a routine of hers, quiet and simple, but it was also an honest and fervent prayer that came from the bottom of her heart.

"In your dreams, at least, may you have *true* happiness..."

That night Bel did dream and in them her grandmother was teaching her to dance. Step by step, move by move, she gently instructed Bel as they turned and twirled together. It was a wonderful dream.

Elise would never know, but Bel had spoken the truth. The girl's dreams were happy, but so was the girl herself. Snuggled comfortably in the peaceful embrace of Elise's arms, Bel was enjoying a small but undeniably true piece of happiness.

# Mia’s Ballroom Dance Club

“Hmm...”

Three days after the Horsemanship Tournament, Mia was relaxing in her room. The crippling muscle soreness that had plagued her had finally subsided, and she was back to being her usual fully-functional self. Unfortunately, something else was also stubbornly insistent on being its usual self...

“Ugh, it doesn’t look like anything’s changed,” she said with a disappointed groan.

The Princess Chronicles she’d borrowed from Bel remained as thin as ever, suggesting that her lifespan remained correspondingly short.

“I hate this. Every time I see this book, it ruins my mood and I don’t feel like doing anything anymore.”

She was about to return the book to Bel’s desk when she noticed something else there.

“My... This is...”

She’d happened upon the results of Bel’s remedial exam!

“Right, that reminds me. She had to stay behind during the holidays and go to summer school. I wonder how she did.”

Curiosity prompted her to flip through the pages. Curiosity also didn’t seem to notice that Mia was no cat, for it made an attempt on her life. Clutching her chest, she gasped for breath as she physically reeled from the sight. It was *atrocious*.

“How in the moons does that girl sleep at night with grades like these?”

But sleep she did. And soundly too. Faced with her granddaughter’s unflappable steel nerves, Mia felt awed. And more than a little terrified. Just then, her eyes stopped on a particular line.

“Her grade for dancing...is E?”

Dancing was, of course, the only thing Mia was any good at, so her granddaughter’s abysmal assessment hit her extra hard.

“E?! That’s horrible! How did she get an E? That’s— Oh, wait...”

Though slightly delayed, the reason eventually dawned on her. Bel had never received formal education in a manner befitting an imperial princess. Mia, meanwhile, had been taught how to dance, along with the etiquette and protocol and all the other particularities of high society. Their upbringings were not comparable.

"I...might have been a little hard on her..."

Bel had said that Ludwig had been giving her lessons, but he probably didn't get around to cultivating her proficiency in the essential accomplishments such as dancing.

"...Then again, it's not like she's faring any better in her academics either. What gives?"

Though mysteries remained, Mia decided not to pursue the question any further.

"She could learn etiquette from Anne and Elise, but I guess she was out of luck when it came to dancing..."

It occurred to her that she'd promised at some point to teach the girl how to dance.

"Hm, I think it might be time for me to do my dear granddaughter a favor," she said, feeling a sudden surge of grand-maternal love. "After all, I'm the one who enrolled her in Saint-Noel. If she keeps failing so horribly at things, Miss Rafina might start giving me dirty looks..."

Even with the sudden surge, her grand-maternal love occupied maybe twenty percent of her motivation. The rest was, as usual, self-love. In any case, with her mind made up, Mia promptly put her plan into action. After dinner, just when Bel had returned from her bath and was about to leap into bed, Mia said, "Bel, may I ask you something?"

"Eh? Uh, yes. What is it, grand—Miss Mia?"

She sat Bel down on the bed and looked her in the eye.

"Tell me, Bel. Do you dislike dancing?" she asked as a precaution.

A certain degree of cultural sophistication was expected of Tearmoon princesses, and while she'd prefer to equip Bel with as many of these skills as was possible, she certainly wouldn't force her to do something she hated.

*I didn't like vegetables, but the head chef made an effort to cook them in a way that I'd find tasty. I should do something similar for Bel. If she doesn't like to dance, I'll have to figure out a way to make it more enjoyable for her...*

This consideration, however, turned out to be unnecessary.

"Hate dancing? No, not really... Why?" said Bel with a puzzled look.

"Ah, good," said a pleased Mia. "In that case, I'm going to teach you to dance."

"Huh? Teach me to...dance?" Bel's eyes widened. "You mean...*that* dance? The legendary one..."

Mia nodded. She wasn't quite sure what Bel meant by "the legendary one," but she nodded anyway.

"Yes, just like I promised you. Brace yourself, because I'm going to drill it into your brain. As a princess of the imperial family, you need to know more than a thing or two about dancing. We can't have you embarrassing yourself."

Bel immediately straightened like a soldier standing at attention.

"Understood, Miss Mia. I'll try my best to learn your dance so I can live up to your name!"

"That's the spirit! I'll make a dancer out of you yet," said Mia, chuckling with cross-armed self-importance.

Bel's dance lessons began the very next day.

"All right," said Mia. "First, we need to lay out some short-term goals to work toward."

"Oh, I have a mini dance assessment in ten days. How about that?"

After some quick deliberation, they agreed to use the practical exam as their first goal.

*That gives me ten days to whip her into shape. I'm going to make sure she gets an A on her next assessment. Oho ho, I can hardly wait to see the look on her classmates' faces when they're mesmerized by her dancing.*

"By the way, Miss Mia, about these clothes..."

Bel tugged at the hem of her half-sleeved shirt, below which she wore shorts that stopped at her knees. The sporty attire certainly suited the activity she was about to partake in, but...

"Aren't you supposed to wear beautiful dresses when dancing? With those long flowing bottoms so you can strike nice poses?"

She regarded her shorts with protruding lips.

"The beautiful dresses come later, Bel. Those are what you want for now. You want to start in clothes that are easy to move in. All you need now

is a partner. I'd like to ask one of the boys for help, but hm..."

Out of consideration for her granddaughter, Mia was hesitant to do so.

*A beginner learning to dance isn't exactly a flattering sight. Bel might have pretty thick skin, but I'm sure even she wouldn't want a boy watching her while she's practicing. That'd be so embarrassing. It'd be nice if I could get someone good at dancing, Sion for example, to help her...but I guess we'll have to wait until she's at least half-decent. I don't want to humiliate her after all.*

Just for the record, had she been offered the choice, Bel would have taken it without a second thought. Sure, she might have to endure some embarrassment, but she'd be *dancing with Sion*. It was, therefore, probably for the best that this unnecessary consideration of Mia's went unmentioned.

"First things first. Fundamentals. When it comes to dancing, fundamentals are everything. I have to start by teaching you all the basics, and I know exactly how I'm going to begin!"

There was a certain dance that had been passed down through the imperial lineage for generations called "the Dance of Moonlight." Designed for dancers to practice their technique, it was a well-crafted exercise piece encompassing all the fundamental techniques of ballroom dancing and included physically strenuous passages to strengthen the muscles. Mia tended to tackle most problems, for both schoolwork and dancing, through overwhelming numerical superiority (the former, of answers memorized, and the latter, of sheer mind-numbing repetition). Having practiced this choreography since she was young, it went without saying that by now, she knew every step and twirl by heart.

"Bel, I'm going to have you learn a secret dance taught only to members of Tearmoon's imperial family. It's called the Dance of Moonlight. I'll demonstrate first, so just watch."

Mia promptly began the dance.

"We start with the feet. Un, deux, trois... Un, deux, trois..."

She moved about smoothly, her steps matching the rhythm she intoned.

"Here, we turn. Bring your right foot around while keeping your left foot planted as much as possible..." she said, demonstrating the motion a few times. "Next, the hands. They should feel lithe. Elegant. Move them gently, as if they're fluttering in the breeze."

A series of graceful twirls ensued.

“You have to get a feel for how far you’re moving while you spin. I heard distance is an important concept in swordsmanship as well. They need to have a sense of where they are relative to their opponent and surroundings. It’s the same in dancing. You need to know your distances. How far each step takes you. How much space you have. That comes with lots of practice. As long as you keep it up, it’ll start to get easier.”

She could feel Bel’s intense gaze on her as she danced. Pleased by the girl’s attention, she carefully demonstrated every movement, slowing down during fast parts and repeating complicated passages for clarity. Upon concluding, she casually shook her hair out and said, “And that’s the gist of it. It’s not that hard, so you’ll probably learn it pretty quickly. Let’s go over the first few steps again—”

“No, it’s okay.”

Mia was interrupted by an eager-eyed Bel.

“I remember all of it, Miss Mia. I think I can do it.”

“...Really?”

“Yes, because Grandmother Mia’s blood flows in my veins!”

“I...suppose it does. Well, go on. Give it a try then,” said Mia, expecting to be impressed. The girl *was* her kin, after all, and she seemed confident. Maybe a few pointers was all she needed.

Bel then proceeded to defy all her expectations. In the worst way possible. After finishing, she looked excitedly at Mia.

“I did it! What do you think, Grandmother Mia?”

“Hm... Hmmm...” Mia’s brows twitched as they resisted the urge to furrow. “I see, I see... That was...”

She regarded her granddaughter’s proudly inflated chest and felt...impressed in spite of herself.

*Where does this girl get the audacity to tell me “I did it” with a performance like that?*

It hardly needs to be said, but one does not simply reproduce all the motions to a dance after seeing it once. The quality of Bel’s performance was exactly what you’d expect of someone on their very first attempt. And yet somehow, there she stood, exceedingly confident and immensely proud of herself for what, in her mind, was doubtlessly a fine example of the Dance of Moonlight. The sheer nerve alone was admirable.

*She can maybe trick a couple people into thinking she did pretty well*

*with that smug look of hers, but she can't fool my eyes.*

With a pretentious clearing of her throat, Mia said, "It's not bad for your first try. You're on the right track."

For the sake of her granddaughter's emotional well-being, she opened with a diplomatic rendition of her opinion.

"In terms of what you have to work on," she continued, "number one will be...accuracy. That is, making sure you're performing each motion correctly. Dance requires a strong foundation of the fundamentals, so take your time learning them. Don't get sloppy, or you'll regret it later."

"Understood!"

Mia smiled with satisfaction at Bel's vigorous nod. They still had time. There was no need to rush. This was a race she could take slowly and steadily, building up Bel's competence little by little.

The next thing she knew, three days had passed with pretty much nothing to show for it.

"This is so strange... How come you still can't do it properly? It's just a gentle flick...you just go like this with your hand and swish swish... See? Nice and elegant."

"Hnnngh, it's hard, Miss Mia..."

Bel hung her head in discouragement. Mia's head, meanwhile, was tilted so far back in puzzlement it looked like it was about to snap off. Alas, Mia was woefully unaware of the fact that her extensive education and practice since childhood had colored her view on dancing, imparting a stereotypically "genius" flair to her teaching style. In other words, the kind of teaching where nobody but a similar genius could make heads or tails of what her abstract descriptions were supposed to mean.

"Hmm... I sense the need for a different approach..." Mia murmured in thought.

Bel's enthusiasm was visibly waning. At this rate, she might end up hating the thought of dancing altogether, and that would be terrible. Just as Mia began to contemplate the issue...

"Excuse me, milady."

"My, Anne. What's the matter?"

"You have a visitor. It's Princess Rania."

"Rania? I wonder what she wants." Mia glanced at Bel's languid form. "All right, let's call it a day then. Bel, go take a bath and clean yourself up. I

need to speak with Rania for a bit."

With that, she ended the dance lesson early and returned to her room.

"Good day, Princess Mia. I'm sorry for the sudden visit," said Rania, standing up from her seat to greet Mia as she entered the room. With beautiful black hair and lustrous tanned skin, her appearance was striking. Specifically, it struck Mia's stomach, which gurgled in response. Not because Mia thought her friend looked edible, of course. That would be inappropriate. And slightly terrifying. Rather, it was because Rania always brought tasty treats with her when she visited, and Mia's tummy had been conditioned to growl in her presence. It was pure reflex by now. Unbothered by this awkward physiological response, Rania continued in her usual tone.

"Also, I apologize for the plainness of my gift. I only brought regular cookies today..."

Mia followed her gaze toward the nearby table, upon which lay the plate of said treats. Her face brightened.

"My, it's *those* cookies! My favorite kind!"

They were the highly preservable variety—the same as the one she'd once received from Anne. She certainly appreciated their practical value, but their plain flavor was something she loved as well. Simple and sweet. It was a taste she could never get enough of. The rest of the items on the table had presumably been prepared by Anne, who supplemented the cookies with black tea, along with a selection of Mia's own sweets.

*Moons, we have ourselves a bit of a feast here!*

As Mia took a seat opposite Rania, Anne promptly poured out two cups of tea. It was lukewarm—perfect for Mia, who'd worked up a sweat and was craving a beverage more refreshing than hot.

*Aaah, Anne does it again. She's so thoughtful.*

Her sip of tea had relaxed her, and she said in a calm tone, "So, Rania, what brings you here today?"

"Actually, I wanted to ask you for advice about something."

"Advice? My, what seems to be the matter?" Mia asked as she promptly bit into her first cookie.

It broke with a satisfying crunch. As she chewed, the treat gradually dissolved in her mouth, leaving behind a pleasant sweetness.

“Aaaah... This simple sweetness, along with the satisfying flavor of wheat... Mmm, it’s so good. I love these.”

There was nothing groundbreaking about its texture, nor was it finger-lickingly delicious. Its charm likely derived from a sense of nostalgia. It was a comforting flavor, like a taste of home, and it was the perfect salve for her ailing psyche, frayed by her constant anxiety over the Chronicles’ thickness.

*Oooh, that really hits the spot. Right there in the center of my very soul. It’s so plain, but so good... I* needed *this...*

As Mia engaged in holistic cookie therapy, Rania hesitantly spoke.

“So, um, about the advice... It’s actually more like...I want to ask you a favor.”

“Oh? A favor? Go ahead. As long as it’s within my power, I’d be happy to help.”

After a bout of lip chewing, Rania finally mustered the will to make her request.

“I, um...heard that recently, you’ve been giving dance lessons.”

“My... Where did you hear that?”

For Bel’s sake, she’d been keeping the lessons a close secret.

“From Miss Bel. She sounded very excited and was telling everyone she met.”

*Damn it, that girl...*

Mia held her head in frustration. Apparently, Bel wasn’t the least bit worried about people finding out that she was learning how to dance.

“Well, good for her, I guess. It’s true that I’ve been booking one of the special-purpose classrooms at school to give Bel dance lessons. We’re going on three days now, I think.”

Rania brightened at this statement.

“I-In that case, could you, um...teach me too?”

“Hm? What do you mean?”

Mia frowned. She didn’t know how much experience Rania had with dancing. Maybe she was struggling with some particular move. But even so, she could just go ask one of the teachers in Saint-Noel. It seemed odd to be coming to Mia for help.

“Are you aware of the Thanksharvest Festival in Perujin?” asked Rania.

“Of course. It’s a grand celebration in which the people of Perujin gather

in the capital to give thanks for the year's harvest. I've heard that there's supposed to be a feast that involves lots of amazing food..."

Mia was caught up on all the gourmet events of neighboring nations. She'd actually been thinking of attending one of Perujin's Thanksharvest Festivals if the opportunity ever presented itself.

*All that fresh Perujin produce... Just thinking about the kinds of food they'd make with it makes me hungry...*

"Then I'm sure you know what we Perujin princesses do during the festival."

"I certainly do. You perform the Thanksharvest Dance as an offering to God, right?"

Perujin princesses, as leaders of their people, personally take charge of the harvest effort and work in concert with farmers. At the same time, they also play the role of priestess in which they offer thanks to God for bestowing them with food. After the dressing-down she received from Ludwig in the previous timeline for forgetting Rania's name, Mia had made sure to do her homework. Recognizing Perujin Agricultural Country's importance to Tearmoon as a source of food imports, she'd committed all the basic details about its princesses to memory.

"So, what's the matter? Is it something about the dance?"

"Yes... To be honest, I— Ah, this is so embarrassing. You see, I'm generally pretty bad at dancing, so I've never been able to do it properly..."

"Ah, I see what you're getting at..."

Rania's request finally made sense. The academy's teachers could teach her how to dance, but that was ballroom dancing. Ritual dancing was beyond their expertise. That was why she'd come to Mia for help, hoping her reputation as a good dancer meant she could teach Rania.

"Oh, but how did you manage this past summer?"

As far as Mia knew, Rania had gone home to Perujin as usual during the summer, meaning she should have carried out all her traditional duties as a priestess.

"I was mostly helping my sister, Arshia. I'm like her assistant. Next summer though, I might have to do everything myself..."

"Right, of course...because I asked Arshia to come to my academy..."

Rania was worried that Arshia's teaching duties at Saint Mia Academy might leave her too busy to return home during the Thanksharvest Festival.

Without Arshia, the whole dance would have to be centered around her, which was an understandably daunting amount of responsibility.

"But it's not like she'll be chained to her desk. I won't mind if she takes some time off to attend important events."

Rania gave her head a small but firm shake.

"If Arshia wanted to come back to enjoy the festival, that's fine. But I don't want her to be forced to take time off work because of me."

There was a sense of hardened resolve within her soft voice. Mia acknowledged it with a nod.

"Well, that settles that then. I'll just have to make a dancer out of you."

As far as Mia was concerned, she would also rather have Arshia concentrate on her wheat research. If that meant she had to add Rania to her list of pupils, then so be it. More lessons were a small price to pay for a potentially faster breakthrough.

"We should start soon," said Mia. "In fact, you can join me and Bel tomorrow. We'll practice together."

Conveniently, Rania's presence might also provide Bel with some much-needed encouragement. The girl had been rather down recently.

"Oh, but I should warn you. I can be a pretty demanding teacher."

"No problem! Just try me!"

With that, Mia's dance class officially expanded its roster.

Now, backtracking a little to the previous day...

"It sure is peaceful around here, isn't it?" Keithwood said to himself as he idly roamed the school's halls and passageways.

He wasn't killing time; he was on patrol. As Sion's attendant-cum-bodyguard, he kept an eye out for any signs of danger.

"Not exactly surprising, given Saint-Noel's impeccable security. I mean, I probably don't even need to be doing this in the first place. Never see anything suspicious anyway."

He continued to wander, his demeanor growing laxer with every autumn-scented breeze. Then, as he rounded a bend, he spotted something that made him stop in his tracks. One of his eyes twitched. A strained smile spread across his lips.

"Well then, I spoke too soon..."

Popping into view at the end of the corridor was Mia, currently engaged

in the textbook definition of suspicious behavior. From her poorly-selected hiding spot behind a pillar, she poked her head out and glanced around with the nervous energy of a small rodent. Failing to notice Keithwood, she then scurried off toward the special-purpose classrooms.

“What in the name of the sun is that girl up to now...” he muttered as he promptly shifted into stalking mode.

In general, Keithwood was a model gentleman, displaying all the grace and decorum befitting an attendant to the Crown Prince of Sunkland. He also had a favorable opinion of Mia; she was a valuable contact for Sion to maintain, and Keithwood personally enjoyed her presence as well. Had he not already pledged his loyalty to Sion, he might have taken a knee before her by now. Therefore, in normal circumstances, he wouldn’t be caught dead doing something as disrespectful as following a lady, never mind a princess he admired.

But follow her he did, because he just couldn’t shake the feeling that he’d regret it otherwise. Something deep in the pit of his stomach stirred. An instinctual warning, perhaps, that she was about to make a royal mess of things... *Edible* things...

“How is it that someone of such abundant talent as her can fail so miserably at basic cooking? Another of life’s endless mysteries, I suppose...”

Finding a strange comfort in the presence of his old friends, the weary sigh and the exasperated grumble, he ducked into the shadows and slipped between them in stealthy pursuit, pausing as his quarry entered one of the classrooms.

“A classroom, huh. That’s...a good thing, I think. At least it’s not the cafeteria. Or worse, the kitchen... Still, I’d better keep my guard up. This is the Great Sage of the Empire I’m up against.”

Given her penchant for thinking outside the box, this could still be some sort of attempt at cooking, and he just lacked the virtuosic imagination to see how. Just as he prepared to dive into that mental rabbit hole, he forced himself to reconsider.

“Okay, no. Get a hold of yourself, man. This is Princess Mia. She might have a lapse of judgment from time to time, but she’s not going to cook in a classroom. I’m just paranoid. Everything is fine. I won’t wake up tomorrow and find half the school burned down...”

He took a deep breath and closed his eyes for a few pensive seconds. Then he nodded to himself.

"Okay. Everything is fine, and I'm just paranoid," he said as he hunkered down. "Nothing wrong with being paranoid though, right? I'll just wait here a while and see how things go. Just to be safe."

Down the rabbit hole he went anyway.

The next day, things took a sharp turn for the worse.

"N-No way... I-Is that Princess Rania?"

Gazing out from his hiding spot, he felt a chill run down his spine as he identified the figure walking alongside his target of observation. Rania Tafrif Perujin, Princess of Perujin Agricultural Country, traded an eager smile with Mia as they slipped into the classroom. Rania, princess of Perujin *Agricultural* Country, known for their bountiful produce, was engaged in some sort of secret cooperative project with Mia. Keithwood shuddered at the thought.

"What could Princess Mia and Princess Rania be doing together?" he mumbled in an attempt to convince himself of his own ignorance. After all, if he didn't know, he could just walk off and pretend nothing had happened.

He failed. Saying the question out loud made the answer even more apparent.

"What else?! Something cooking-related, obviously!"

He reprimanded himself for his moment of weakness and stared at the classroom. They could only be doing one thing in there. Were this a normal tea party, they'd have no need for secrecy. All that sneakiness suggested something was up. He could smell it in the air, and it smelled like Mia's usual blend of innocently-destructive shenanigans.

"...At worst, a whole lot of good Perujin crops are going to end up victims of her cooking."

He gritted his teeth as gut-wrenching scenes of tragedy flashed through his mind. Fresh vegetables lay in sloppily-cut tatters, cruelly robbed of their appetizing futures. Mountains of fruits floated in stew like bloated carcasses. Two slices of bread, their soft flesh distended, struggled to hold the enormous girth of a whole apple as their life and identity as a sandwich drained away. As his visions reached their dreadful climax, these culinary abominations forced themselves upon his master. Then, yet insatiated, they

turned their attention toward Keithwood himself...

"Gah! Scorching suns! I have to do something about this..."

Keithwood was a competent cook, but even he didn't have a perfect grasp of Perujin produce and could hardly be expected to turn their more exotic products into palatable dishes. What of the Great Sage then?

"Princess Mia is an erudite individual. It's certainly possible for her to possess some obscure knowledge about cooking."

Had she the culinary skills to back up that knowledge, all would be well. The problem was that she almost certainly did not.

"I can almost hear her talking about making some sort of fancy mushroom dish... That would be a total nightmare for everyone involved..."

He gulped, then pressed his hand to his stomach, which had begun to ache in anticipation.

"I think I'd better deal with this before it's too late..." He grimaced. "Ugh, I told myself I never want to go through an experience like that again, but..."

He stood up and sighed.

"Bah, I guess I have no choice."

With extreme reluctance, he plodded toward the classroom.

In the classroom, Rania was demonstrating her ritual dance for the first time. Dressed in loose trousers and a short-sleeved blouse, she held a castanet in each hand and clacked them as she danced.

*Clack! Click clack!*

The instruments produced a steady beat, which Rania danced to, moving in time with the percussive rhythm. Well, sort of, if you have a very generous definition of "in time."

*Hm, it's not really lining up,* thought Mia as she studied Rania's performance. *I think those instruments are throwing her off. It feels like she's focusing so much on them that her actual dancing is getting sloppy. Also, she's not stopping in places where she should, so there's no punch to her movements. It's probably because she's always too busy thinking about the next motion to hold a pose properly...*

Mia continued to analyze the dance, her pensive expression persisting even after the performance had ended.

"And, well...that's it. Um, what do you think?" asked a nervous Rania.

“Hm...”

She crossed her arms and, in the pretentious tone of a contest judge...

“You were...pretty much off the whole time.”

...Delivered a ruthlessly honest remark!

“You started out fine, but gradually, your clacking and your dancing fell out of sync. It could be due to fatigue, but hm...”

*It feels more like nerves to me.*

In the absence of her sister, the pressure of performing alone must have been getting to her. It would explain her timing issues and hurried motions, considering performance nerves naturally caused people to rush.

*It’s hard because she has to keep her own rhythm.*

The presence of instrumental accompaniment would go a long way toward alleviating this problem, but Rania had no such luxury. As a result, her tempo steadily grew faster and faster until her body couldn’t keep up anymore.

“I’m sorry to say this, but I think I’ll have to ask you to join Bel and practice your fundamentals.”

Mental pressure aside, her technique wasn’t anything to write home about. Mia therefore decided that the shortest path to success was to start by honing the basics. With solid technique would come confidence, which was crucial for further improvement.

Which was actually true! In a rare turn of events and against all odds, Mia the Great Educator made a judgment call that was incredibly and undeniably correct! Thus was the nature of Mia, for whom dance and mushrooms were always serious business.

“Now then, let’s get star— Oh?”

There was a knock on the door.

“My, I wonder who that is.”

Mia glanced around Anne’s shoulder as she opened the door. Standing in the hall was the familiar sight of Sion’s attendant.

“Hm, Keithwood? What’s he here for?”

He looked a tad pale, which only puzzled her further.

“Please excuse my sudden intrusion, Princess Mia,” Keithwood said, walking in. “It has come to my attention that you have recently been engaging in some form of activity with great enthusiasm, and I was wondering if there might be anything I could help wi— Hm?”

He paused as he scanned the room. With a perplexed expression, he turned toward Bel and Rania and asked, “Uh... What exactly is going on here?”

“Well, I did not expect you to show up, Keithwood. We were trying to keep this a secret, but so much for that now.” Mia let out a deep breath and shook her head. “If you really must know, I’m giving Bel and Rania dancing lessons.”

“...Dancing lessons?”

“Yes. Bel, especially. She really needs them, and I really didn’t want people finding out before she’s ready...”

She glanced at Bel who, bless her poor soul, was staring down at the ground with a noticeable blush. Being bad at dancing must, as Mia expected, be a rather embarrassing matter to her.

Bel pattered over to Mia and whispered, “G-Grandmother Mia, look! I-It’s...the Libra King’s loyal retainer! The brilliant and steadfast swordsman Keithwood!”

Despite the stammering, there was a clear sense of wonder in her voice.

“Wow...! Wow! This is my first time seeing him so close. He’s standing right there. I could touch him!”

She excitedly swung her arms, the source of her cheek redness suddenly looking less like the embarrassment of having her poor dancing exposed than the adrenaline-fueled flush of a fangirl who’d just met her idol. Miabel had become Maniabel!

“Ah, I see,” said Mia. “So that’s it.”

Keithwood, however, was unaware of this. He looked at Bel and shifted uncomfortably.

“I apologize. It was thoughtless of me to barge in. Please, disregard my presence. I am but milord’s lowly attendant. Consider yourself to have been looked upon by a dog, if it please you,” he said in a solemn tone.

“Hmm...”

Mia considered him, her lips puckering in thought.

*I figured it’d be fastest to teach Rania the Dance of Moonlight too, but that would leave Bel with nothing to do. My ultimate goal for Bel is to have her get good at ballroom dancing, and to that end, she’ll need a partner sooner or later... This might actually be a good opportunity. Maybe she’ll be a little keener to learn if she’s paired up with Keithwood. She seems*

*rather fond of him after all...*

She turned toward him.

"Keithwood, would you happen to be well-versed in dancing?"

"Huh? Well, I know a thing or two, I suppose," he answered with a shrug.

*A thing or two, huh... Based on my experience, his thing or two usually is more like ten or twenty! He looks exactly like the kind of person who'd be charming girls left right and center on the dance floor.*

The thought was oddly vexing, and she scowled at him before continuing.

"In that case, as punishment for your prying, I demand your cooperation in this matter. You embarrassed a young maiden by learning of her inability to dance. The least you can do to make it up is help me teach her—"

A warning from Mia's grandmotherly instincts gave her pause.

*Wait a minute... This might be a risky idea. What if Bel ends up turning heads and all the boys start flocking to her?*

Private dance lessons with a seasoned lady-killer like Keithwood sounded like a very bad idea. He'd be a terrible influence on her. She was just about to retract her request when Bel piped up, effectively yanking them out of her mouth and stamping them with an official seal.

"R-Really? Are you serious, Miss Mia? I get to dance with Keithwood? *The* Keithwood?! Omigosh! That's... Wow!"

The young girl, face redder than ever, threw her hands up in the air. Mia shook her head like a disapproving parent.

"I swear, some days, I'm not sure if we're really related..." she said before turning to Keithwood. "Well, there you have it. If it's not entirely too much to ask, I'd like you to be Bel's dance partner and help her practice. She has a dance test coming up in six days, and I want her to get a good grade."

"I see. If that's the case," he answered with a gentle smile, "then consider yourself partnered, young lady. I shall do everything in my power to help you improve."

"Th-Thank you! I'll do my best too!" Bel said with an eager bow.

*Aaah, learning to dance with Grandmother Mia is so much fun.*

Bel lay cradled in the softness of her bed, the last hours of the day

draining away with her will to keep her eyes open. This liminal moment between yester and morrow, when she could feel the gentle caress of slumber but had yet to be pulled into its embrace, was her favorite time of day. Her face buried in her pillow, she allowed the day's memories to fill her mind. One by one, she reviewed them, as if reaffirming that yes, today, like the others, had been full of happiness as well.

*Ehe he, I would never have imagined I'd get to dance with Keithwood.* That *Keithwood! Famous for his unwavering loyalty! It really is just like a dream.*

To Bel, Keithwood was like a character from a fairy tale, and dancing with him had made her feel like she was one too. Her body had felt light, as if she were about to float away at any moment. She'd tried to stay still, but every fiber of her body had yearned to move, to spin, to dance. All in all, the experience had been downright enchanting. She let out a blissful breath.

"This is...such a happy life..."

She meant it. There was no doubt in her mind that her days were filled with happiness. Saint-Noel felt like a magical wonderland that had popped right out of her dearest dreams. There was delicious food everywhere, and she could always eat as much as she wanted, sweets included! Yes, homework was a little hard...but school could be a lot of fun. She'd even made a friend! It was a dream come true.

Though she had no idea when this dream would end, right now, while it still persisted, she was undoubtedly happy as could be.

But that's the thing. She'd *always* been happy. No matter the circumstances, she'd never been anything less...because her life was a gift, and it had come at a cost. So many people had sacrificed so much to bestow it on her. That life, then, had to be happy. Nothing else was acceptable. For the sake of all those who'd loved her—all those kindhearted people who put their lives on the line for her—she would not and could not let her smile wane. She continued to smile. Because she was happy. Always happy.

"Right now...I should be *really* happy, but..."

She was. Very much so. But she had no one to tell, and that made her feel a little lonely. She wanted to tell her dear Mother Elise about all the wonderful things that had happened to her today. She could imagine the delight on Mother Elise's face as she recounted her experience of meeting her grandmother in the flesh. But it was a vain wish, because the people dear to Bel were no longer here. The person she wanted to tell most could never listen to her again.

"Oh, what about...a letter..."

Suddenly, Bel had a thought. There *was* still something that linked her to Mother Elise. Or rather, someone—the yet-young Elise. It was only a weak bond, lacking the strength of the memories they once shared, but...

"Yes, I should write a letter...to Mother—no, to Elise."

She placed her hopes on that fragile thread, stretching from future to past, believing that so long as it kept them connected, her words would

reach the source of that tender warmth of yore. A letter, then. In it, she would describe how magnificent her grandmother had been today. But that wouldn't be enough. She would keep writing. So many wonderful things had happened today, and she would list them all one by one. That was how she'd tell her.

"I'm happy right now, Mother Elise."

She didn't know when this dream would end, but every second of it, including this very moment, had been filled with happiness.

"Oh, I know. Since I'm writing a letter, I might as well..."

Ten days later, Mia held a piece of paper in one trembling hand. Written on it was the result of Bel's dance assessment.

"...Th-This can't be right. I spent so much time teaching her. I even got Keithwood to help. So how come her grade is...a C?"

To give some context, C was a passing grade, but just barely so. Not great, but, by definition, not failure either.

"I am not okay with this!" she exclaimed.

After voicing a loud and prolonged sequence of grievances about the futility of her efforts, Mia glanced at Bel, who didn't seem the slightest bit upset. The sight of her granddaughter's carefree smile caused her to deflate, and she sighed.

"Well, at least it doesn't seem like you're getting bullied for being bad at dancing. In that case, I guess it's fine even if your grades aren't that good..."

Just as Mia was coming to terms with how to be an understanding parent, Bel abruptly asked, "Oh, by the way, Miss Mia, when does the glowing start?"

"Hm? The what?"

"The glowing. When is my body going to start glowing?"

"...Huh?"

Mia gaped at the girl, utterly confused by her question.

"Mother Elise told me that when you danced, you literally glowed. That's why I figured if I learned how to dance, I'd start glowing too," said Bel, emphasizing her point with an enthusiastic but still-clumsy twirl.

Mia's head promptly began to ache.

"Elise... What in the moons were you telling this girl?" she muttered.

Nevertheless, she saw no reason to force the disappointing truth on Bel

and shatter her hopes. After some quick thinking, she struck her palm with her fist in a gesture of sudden inspiration.

"Ah, about that... Do you remember the name of the dance I taught you?"

"Huh? Um, yes. It's called the Dance of Moonli— Oh!"

"That's right. Do you understand now?" said Mia, nodding with the slow, conspiratorial air of someone imparting a secret.

"So basically, once I can perform the Dance of Moonlight perfectly, it'll happen to me too..."

Bel grinned in expectation. Mia grinned too, though her emotion was less innocent.

*Oho ho, that should make her more eager to get better at dancing. A brilliant idea, if I do say so myself,* she thought, profoundly pleased with herself.

A few days later...

"Wh-What in the moons is this?!"

While reading through the Chronicles, Mia found the following passage:

*Princess Mia was a peerless dancer. Expertly versed in all forms of dance, it is rumored she even perfected that legendary dance taught only to those of imperial blood. When mastered, this dance would cause the performer to emit a glow like moonlight...*

But we have come to the end of this current tale, so her subsequent swoon and the ensuing commotion is a story you'll have to imagine for yourselves.

# Mia's Diary of Island Incidents

The Thirtieth Day of the Seventh Month

Today, I had grilled ababalone for lunch. It was excellent. The chewy texture reminded me a little of mushrooms. It had that distinct smell of fine seafood too, which I like. Also it was salted just right, and the seaweed salad that came with it was nice and sinewy. Fun to chew. It really made me realize that food is about more than just flavor.

Eating seafood on a boat is about as luxurious as it gets.

The fact that shellfish are a little like mushrooms and really tasty is a new discovery for me though. I should tell the head chef and have him add them to the menu as soon as possible.

Highly recommended ☆x5

I had a strange soup for dinner. It was made by cooking this weird creature called an "Archdaemon's familiar." The thing has a lot of tentacles, which grossed Esmeralda out, but I tried some, and it's actually really tasty. There are suckers on its legs, and they have this really unique texture when chewed. Really easy to get hooked on these.

Recommend ☆x4

Note: I feel like most food from the sea has a chewy texture. We're arriving at the island tomorrow. I'm looking forward to what I'll get to eat there.

So, reading it over, it seems like my diary has turned into a food review page again. I'm not sure how. Maybe it's cursed or something.

Anyway, we finally managed to return to our boat. It's been a crazy couple of days, but now that we're all back safe and sound, I think I'm going to remember this experience fondly. Since I'm going through my memories right now, I might as well write them down.

*Day One*

We arrived at the island that Esmeralda uses as a vacation spot. Just before we reached land, we had a little accident with our rafts flipping over, but everything was fine. Abel and Sion rushed to my aid, and with their help, I got onto the island without any trouble.

Once we got settled on the island, Esmeralda started coaching me on swimming. I figured out how to swim right away. Everyone was shocked at how quickly I learned. Even Sion's eyes went wide. He said, "You look like a mermaid!" I'm sure he was exaggerating a little, but the thought is certainly appreciated.

The rest of the day was perfectly fine too. It was a lot of fun. The trouble started on the second day.

*Day Two*

We woke up to a storm in the morning. The wind was so strong I thought I was going to be blown away. I'm really light, after all. Lightweight people like me need to be extra careful in strong winds. Then I realized that the only people around were me, Esmeralda, Anne, Abel, Sion, Keithwood, and Nina. Everyone except the seven of us had disappeared! Even the Emerald Star was gone. I can still remember how shocked I was.

*Day Three*

The storm passed, but the Emerald Star didn't come back. We had no choice but to start figuring out how to survive on the island by ourselves. Since I was the resident survival expert, everyone followed my instructions. We gathered food and started signal fires. It's all a fond memory now, but it was a lot of work at the time, which was made worse by the fact that Esmeralda suddenly vanished...

For the sake of Esmeralda's reputation, I'll skip that part of the story. In any case, on day four, we finally got off the island. But little did I know, at the very end of this adventure was where the greatest danger lay. While we were swimming toward the Emerald Star, a man-eating fish appeared in front of us! It was out for blood, and it came at me with terrible speed, which was actually a relief. It was much better for it to come after me and not the others, because I was ready for it. So, once the massive man-eating monster of a fish got close enough, I slapped it right on the nose and sent it

whimpering away. Easy-peasy.

I did, however, discover a terrible secret. My gut is telling me there will be lots of trouble down the road. Just thinking about how I'm going to explain everything to Miss Rafina is giving me a headache. I'm going to need to make so many excuses...

Ugh, my ancestors sure didn't make things easy for me.

# Afterword

Greetings, I'm Mochitsuki. Thank you for purchasing volume five of Tearmoon Empire. Thanks to the positive reception of readers like yourself, we've managed to put out five whole volumes of this series. To tell the truth though, it's been nothing but one unforeseen issue after another.

For example, this series was written with four episodes in each part. The idea was to have each volume contain two episodes, creating a nice two-book structure for each part. That was the intention, at least. The deserted island story, however, grew longer than anticipated, resulting in the format you see now. Furthermore, Esmeralda, whom you can see adorning the cover illustration of volume five, was originally supposed to be just another name in the "Other Characters" list. I'm still not sure how she managed to become important enough of a character to stand alongside Mia in the cover art. It's quite bizarre.

The point I'm trying to make is that I, as the author of this series, practice something very similar to Mia's back-float horse riding. Whenever a wave emerges from the characters, I simply let my body relax and engage in back-float storywriting. Somehow, I've managed to both stay afloat and drift all the way here.

It'd be nice if I could just keep going like this, but... Yeah, I should probably get my act together. I'll, uh, try my best.

Mochitsuki: "Moving on then. It's time to unveil the results of the character polls. Thank you for all your votes."

Mia: "Honestly, I don't know why you even bother. What's the point of voting when I'm obviously going to win?"

Mochitsuki: "...Right, of course. Anyway, I'm sure everyone is looking forward to seeing the results." (Note: This was written at the end of July.)

Mia: "But I do admit that a postcard with only me on it feels a little lacking. Maybe we should pair me up with someone?"

Mochitsuki: "Well, mascots tend to be pretty popular for these things.

How about we pair you up with, you know, that mascot of ours?”

Mia: “We have a mascot? Who—”

Gui: “You called?”

Mia: “Gui? How do you even pronounce that? Like ‘guy,’ I guess? I don’t see how— Oh, this is that stupid pun, isn’t it? Fungi and fun guy. Oh, you people. I didn’t know you secretly created a mushroom mascot for us.” (Bright smile)

Now, some words of appreciation.

I’d like to thank the illustrator Gilse for always providing such beautiful artwork. The cover illustration this time was absolutely brilliant with its air of fantasy. The color of the cave is exactly as I imagined!

Thank you to my editor, F, who’s helped me with all sorts of problems—deadlines, for one. I appreciate your consideration.

As always, thank you to my family for the ongoing support.

Finally, to all the readers continuing to accompany Mia on her journey, thank you for your time and interest. I hope to enjoy your support for a long time.

Let us meet again in the sixth volume.

REVENGE
TA-DA!!
YOU STOLE A GOOD HALF OF IT LAST TIME.
MIA COMES TO KUOLAN FOR A REMATCH.
BUT THIS TIME, I'M GOING TO EAT THIS WHOLE CARROT CAKE IN FRONT OF YOU!
SNIFF
SMIRK...
HEE HEE, YOU CAN'T REACH ME HERE, CAN YOU?
WATCH AS I DEVOUR THIS CAKE BEFORE YOUR VERY EYES.
HACK-A-PCHOO!
THE CAKE WAS KUOLAN'S AFTER THAT.
5
Tearmoon Empire
{Vol.5}
THANK YOU FOR PURCHASING THE BOOK!
もりのみず
Morino

Tearmoon Empire ~A story about a reincarnated princess and her comeback from the guillotine~

# Announcing the results of the first character popularity poll!

1475 TOTAL VOTES!

We held a commemoration project in honor of the stage play! Characters appearing in volumes 1-4 were on the ballot. We're now announcing all 33 beloved contestants and their rankings!

*This poll was conducted on the official Tearmoon website (tobooks.jp/tearmoon) from July 27, 2020 to August 20, 2020

## 1st

## Mia Luna Tearmoon

463 VOTES

## 2nd

## Ludwig Hewitt

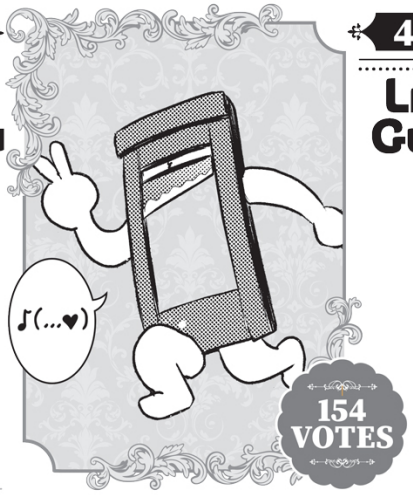
274 VOTES

## 3rd

## Abel Remno

171 VOTES

## 5th
## Anne Littstein




## 4th
## Li'l Guill

### 6th~

| | |
|---|---|
| **6th** | Monica Buendia |
| **7th** | Dion Alaia |
| **8th** | Esmeralda Etoile Greenmoon |
| **9th** | Miabel Luna Tearmoon |
| **10th** | Rafina Orca Belluga |
| **11th** | Keithwood |
| **12th** | Tiona Rudolvon |
| **13th** | Citrina Etoile Yellowmoon |
| **14th** | Sion Sol Sunkland |
| **15th** | Adelaide Luna Tearmoon (Mia's Mother) |
| **16th** | Rania Tafrif Perujin |
| **17th** | Liora Lulu |
| **18th** | Viscount Berman |
| **19th** | Malong |
| **20th** | Chloe Forkroad |
| **21st** | Matthias Luna Tearmoon |
| **22nd** | Musta Waggman (Imperial Head Chef) |
| **23rd** | Arshia Tafrif Perujin |
| **24th** | Elise Littstein |
| **25th** | Sapphias Etoile Bluemoon |
| **26th** | Selia (Orphanage Prodigy) |
| **27th** | Vanos |
| **28th** | Lynsha |
| **29th** | Ruby Etoile Redmoon |
| **30th** | Ogen (Imperial Guard) |
| **31st** | Galv (Ludwig's Master) |
| **32nd** | Nina |
| **33rd** | Marco Forkroad |

### Gilse's Message

So, in the end, first place still went to Princess Mia, the Great Sage of the Empire. But don't worry! There was definitely no fraud! I believe having some unexpected results is a part of what makes popularity polls fun. Also, I'm glad I got to see how popular each character is. Thank you to everyone who voted.

### Mochitsuki's Message

Such an unexpected result raises suspicions of bribery, but rest assured that no such crime occurred. Furthermore, let it be known that a golden Mia statue shall be delivered to Mia for her victory. I'm sure she'll love it!

**A big thank you to everyone for getting so many votes in!**

# Bonus Short Story

## Otome Game IV Girls' Side

### Start

"A...morality play?" Mia asked.

That day, Rafina had come to the student council office to consult with her.

"Yes. It's actually an annual event for the student council. We always put on a morality play during the theater festival to promote moral awareness and ethical behavior in students. However, I suspect it gets boring when put on the same sorts of plays year after year, so I was wondering if you could help me come up with something new. I heard you were quite familiar with such things."

"I see. Hm..."

Mia hunched over and crossed her arms to mull over the abrupt request. A few seconds later, she looked back up.

"Well, I do have an author under my employment, and this certainly is something I'm personally interested in."

She had, after all, often suspected herself of possessing latent talent in poetry and writing. That was what motivated her to give her chest a confident thump and declare, "All right, count me in. A request from you is a request I refuse to ignore. I'll have a play written for you in no time!"

Confidence radiated from Mia as she returned to her room. Driven by an eagerness to see what masterful work she was about to produce, she went straight to her desk and, with the air of someone about to *make art*, reached deliberately for her instrument of creation—a fine wooden pen. It was a present she'd recently received from her father. It was also in near-mint condition, having scribed little more than her brief diary entries.

"Let's see now... What kind of story should I write?"

She placed a sheet of parchment on the desk and pondered for a while.

“U-Uh oh... Nothing’s coming to mind! Nothing at all!”

Her reality check came swiftly and mercilessly. Inevitably too; an original script for a play was hardly the kind of thing a total amateur could produce on demand.

“Hnnngh... In that case...”

**① “I should take a nap. I can’t help it if the ideas aren’t coming, after all! Hm? My, is it just me or does this bed feel a little different?”**

**Go to [A-1]**

**② “I should go out and look for inspiration! I won’t get any ideas just sitting in my room like this!”**

**Go to [A-2]**

**③ “I should take a peek at Elise’s drafts, maybe? I might find some hints in there.”**

**Go to [D-1]**

## [A-1] Take a Nap!

"...I should take a nap. After all, I can't help it if the ideas aren't coming! Hm? My, is it just me or does this bed feel a little different?"

She studied her bed, and soon realized that it had indeed been switched.

"That reminds me, they did say they were going to replace the old bed. Let's see here..."

With a hop, she threw herself onto it.

"Ooo, I like it. It's so comfortable. Maybe this is how new beds always are?"

Her expression curious, she tilted her head from side to side a few times.

"It feels...easier to sleep in too, somehow. I can't quite put my finger on it. Something to do with the way it supports my neck, perhaps..."

The bed's wooden frame was brand new, still carrying a pleasant whiff of fresh timber.

"I feel like I'm going to have very good dreams sleeping in this." She giggled. "Maybe I should just make my dream the play...write down what happens and...use that as the draft...zzz..."

Within seconds, she'd plunged into the world of her dreams.

"...My, where am I?"

When she came to, Mia found herself standing in a vast stretch of barren land. Her brow furrowed in confusion at the unfamiliar landscape.

"Hm? I think I see something. What's that..."

A quick scan of her surroundings revealed a figure moving in the distance. It seemed to be running toward her with heavy, thumping strides. At first, she couldn't figure out what she was looking at. It was big and rectangular with some sort of shiny metallic thing up top. It was the gleam of that metal she recognized first.

"Wha— *Eeeeeek!*"

A horrified scream escaped her as she realized that it was a guillotine with arms and legs. A *guillotine monster* was coming for her!

"A-A walking guillotine is trying to chop my head off! And it's coming this way!"

She spun on her heels and tried to run, but...

*“Wait! Don’t go!”*

A pitiful-sounding voice gave her pause.

“Wh-Who’s that?”

Nervously, she turned around again, only to discover the massive bipedal guillotine looming over her. It stood there, tall, motionless, and...sad-looking?

“W-Was that you just now?” she asked, frowning.

The guillotine inclined itself forward. That was, she figured, its version of a nod.

*“Please don’t run away.”*

Its mournful voice echoed in her ears.

*“Why do you look at me like that? Why do you run? You’re the ones who made me like this, aren’t you? So how come you’re scared of me?”*

“...Huh? What do you mean? Of course I’m scared of you. I mean, you’re a guillotine.”

Who wouldn’t be scared of the execution apparatus that once lopped off their head? Voicing this perfectly sensible opinion, however, only deepened the grief in the guillotine’s voice.

“*I didn’t ask for this. I wanted to be something that makes everyone happy. A wooden table or chair. A bed. A house. I could have been anything. But...I’m* this*. Why...”*

It inclined itself again. That was probably the equivalent of hanging its head. Its sorrow, at least, was evident. Suddenly, Mia’s surroundings dissolved and a different scene rose to take its place. She saw a single tree sprout in a forest. Over time, it slowly grew thicker and taller. Eventually, it was cut down by a lumberjack. Lying on its side, the tree wondered what it would become. On its way to the woodworker, its heart danced as it imagined all the wonderful things it could be. Furniture, perhaps. Part of a home would be nice too. A bridge, even, that helped people go about their daily lives. The tree dreamed about life as a famous bridge, well-trodden and well-loved, that was surrounded by the smiles of townspeople and songs of travelers.

It wasn’t to be. No smiles would grace the tree. Instead, it was turned into a fearsome instrument of death, doomed to be bathed in gazes of terror and abhorrence. The tree—the guillotine—mourned its fate.

“I see... Perhaps you were a victim too.”

Mia placed a hand on the crestfallen guillotine's shoulder. It was, in all honesty, a very surreal sight.

*"I have a request, Mia. Please, don't let me be turned into this thing. I don't want to chop your head off. I never did. I want to make you happy."*

"Well, it seems we are in agreement then. I don't want to have my head chopped off!"

And so, the two of them gripped each other's hand in a firm shake as guillotine and once-beheaded-princess shared a moment of mutual understanding.

*"Thank you. If that's what you believe, then I'm sure everything will be fine."* The guillotine suddenly began to glow. *"I'll always be there for you. In a different form, but I'll be there...as something that will make you happy this time...so please, use me well."*

"Guill!"

Mia shouted as she woke with a start. She shook her head and sat up.

"What a strange dream."

An engraving on the headboard caught her eye. It was rectangular with the shape of a crescent moon at its inner right side. Turned vertically, it did kind of resemble that guillotine...

"No way...I'm just being silly."

Mia chuckled to herself. The notion that a tree meant to be made into an beheading instrument had, by some turn of fate, instead been crafted into a bed in Saint-Noel was, frankly, absurd. Still...

"It'd be nice if it were true though. What a wonderful story that would be."

She nodded, appreciating the thought of the tree finally becoming what it had always dreamed of.

"Oh, that gives me an idea. Maybe I can make the play about that tree..."

She reached for her pen, determined to commit the details to writing before her memory faded.

"How fascinating. It's the same tree, but its fate changes drastically depending on whether it's made into furniture or an apparatus for executions. The philosophical ramifications are...compelling, to say the least," Rafina said in a contemplative tone as she read through Mia's draft.

“The students here in Saint-Noel can go on to become anything they wish. I suspect this will prove to be quite the thought-provoking story for them.”

She turned to Mia with a gentle smile.

“What a wonderful script, Mia. You’ve outdone yourself again.”

So, with Rafina’s blessing, it was decided that the Mia-penned play “The Tree and the Guillotine” would be performed at the theater festival.

And the best part of all? Mia ended up playing the guillotine. In a full body costume, to boot.

*The Guillotine Dream*

End - Return to Start

## [A-2] Look for Inspiration!

"...I should go out and look for inspiration! I won't get any ideas just sitting in my room like this!"

Her mind made up, Mia promptly left her room.

"Now then... Where should I go? I wonder if there are any special spots where I can just sit down and the script will start writing itself. A writer's holy ground or something."

While pondering such lazy fantasies, Mia decided that...

**① "I'm sensing a refreshing aura from the water garden!"**

**Go to [B-1]**

**② "In situations like these, nothing beats heading to town."**

**Go to [B-2]**

**③ "The library, of course! It's the perfect place to get some thinking done."**

**Go to [B-3]**

**④ "If I go to the training grounds, I might find Abel and Sion... Maybe they can give me some ideas!"**

**Go to [B-4]**

## [B-1] Go to the Water Garden!

“I’m sensing a refreshing aura from the water garden!”

On a whim, Mia strolled toward the courtyard.

“Oh, hello Mia.”

There she found Rafina standing by the fountain. The water rippling gently in the calm autumn wind, coupled with the faint melancholy of Rafina’s lone figure—like some fairy of the fountain—made for an enchanting sight, and Mia stared in spite of herself.

“What brings you here? Looking for a place to rest?”

“Oh, um, no. I need some inspiration for the script, and I’m walking around to see if I get any ideas.”

“I see,” Rafina said with an apologetic expression. “I’m sorry to have burdened you with this...”

“I-It’s fine. Don’t worry. Just, uh, leave it to me. I’ll handle it no problem.”

She couldn’t back out now. Not after the supreme confidence she’d displayed when taking on the job.

“Oh, why don’t you have some tea with me then? Maybe an idea will come to you while we chat.”

“Hm... You have a point. I think I will then.”

A vision of Rafina’s exquisite tea time sweets filled Mia’s mind.

The two girls sat down on a bench near the fountain. Just as Mia’s eyes began sparkling with expectation at the tea and sugary pastries that were surely about to appear...

“I suppose a play meant to make the students better people will have to involve an evil noble being taught a lesson.”

Rafina abruptly steered the conversation toward the play.

“An evil noble... Hm...”

“Mm-hm. Maybe something about how if they do bad things, they’ll be put to death. That might work.”

“H-How terribly violent!”

Mia drew back in horror. Her horror was well-deserved, too, considering *she* was someone who had done bad things and been put to death,

something Rafina had played no small part in. The last thing she wanted to do was establish a link between poor behavior and rolling heads. She'd much rather Rafina display copious amounts of tolerance and mercy.

*Oh! I know what I should do!*

In a moment of miraculous inspiration, Mia's little gray pulp of vaguely cell-shaped structures stirred with an idea.

"Miss Rafina, what if we had you play the role of a high-born villainess?"

"Gosh, me? But..."

Hearing a hint of reluctance, Mia offered some encouragement.

"I think you should give it a try. Besides, for something like this, the more unexpected the casting, the more interesting it is."

Encouragement, sweetened further with an enticing hook. Her goal was twofold. First, she wanted Rafina to feel what it was like to be a bad person. In addition...

"Playing a role that's completely different from who you normally are is a lot of fun, you know? This is a rare chance for you to experience what it's like to be a villain. You should take it."

...She saw this as an opportunity for Rafina to vent any pent-up frustrations. Unlike Mia, Rafina was a real saint, which saddled her with all the associated expectations of virtue and propriety in her daily conduct. That sounded suffocating, perfect for breeding dark, bitter thoughts. That was where the play came in. By playing the role of a villain, she would be free to behave as she wished. It would liberate her for a time from the stifling demands of her station. The way Mia saw it, if Rafina could get it all out of her system, then maybe she'd become a more forgiving person. It was all quite calculated.

"Well, if you say so... I suppose I should then."

After receiving confirmation from Rafina, Mia began her script anew. Not that she'd got much done in the first place, but she now had a fresh perspective that made things much easier. Specifically, she could write from her own perspective, with herself as the main character. Her pen danced effortlessly across the parchment, eventually weaving a story about a young villainess, born to a Duke, who fell in love with a handsome prince, picked on a poor noble girl, and ultimately met her ruin. Though it duly delivered on poetic justice with an overarching theme of rewarding good and

punishing evil, the subtle, melancholic nuance of her unrequited romance was surprisingly compelling. Coupled with her sympathetic characterization, the play proved wildly popular. Particularly noteworthy was the role of the villainous protagonist, which Rafina portrayed with great enthusiasm. Her riveting performance kept the students talking for a long time afterward. As for what exactly they were saying, well...

“Oh, it’s just like Mia said. I gave it a go, and it turned out to be a lot more fun than I expected! What a wonderful experience that was.”

...It never reached Rafina’s ears.

*Mia, Rafina, and the Villainess*
End - Return to Start

## [B-2] Go to Town

"In situations like these, nothing beats heading to town."

Converting mental momentum into physical, Mia immediately got to her feet, called Anne, and headed out.

"Where are we going today?" Anne asked as they walked through the town.

"Good question. I'm not headed anywhere in particular, so... Oh?"

Mia stopped, a curious frown on her face.

**① "The person in front of that jewelry store is..."**

**Go to [C-1]**

**② "The person watching the boats over there is..."**

**Go to [C-2]**

## [B-3] Go to the Library

"The library, of course. It's the perfect place to get some thinking done."

Mia arrived at the library and began walking. She walked from one end to the other, then back. Needless to say, she did not run into any ideas along the way.

"Hm, this isn't doing the trick. If only I had a starting point. Something to work off..." she mumbled as she wandered through the stacks.

Just then, a figure leapt into view, and she stopped short.

"My... Isn't that Keithwood?"

She found him standing in an aisle, book in hand and eyes on its pages.

"Hm... Maybe he'll have some ideas for me," she pondered out loud before changing her mind. "Actually, never mind. It's a morality play I'm writing. I doubt Keithwood will have anything useful to offer. He's too popular with the girls."

With that deeply injurious thought, she turned toward the back of the library, where the entrance to the underground archives lay.

"Maybe they're hiding some sort of secret script writing manual down there..."

She proceeded down the steps hoping, in classic Mia fashion, to find an effortless solution to her problem...

**① "...My, I think I feel some kind of mystical aura radiating from that bookshelf."**

Go to [C-3]

**② "...Hm, I see a lot of ancient tomes over in that area. I should go take a look."**

Go to [C-4]

**③ "There's a dark spot behind those bookshelves... How intriguing!"**

Go to [C-5]

## [B-4] Go to the Training Grounds!

“If I go to the training grounds, I might find Abel and Sion... Maybe they can give me some ideas!”

One might assume she just wanted to flirt with a pair of handsome princes, but that would be doing her a grave disservice, for she only had the best interests of her script in mind. She swears it! Honest!

So she trekked down to the training grounds, whereupon...

“My, there’s no sign of them...”

...She found not the princes but a pair of girls, Tiona Rudolvon and Liora Lulu.

“I wonder what the two of them are doing here.”

Just as she was about to get their attention, she witnessed something that made her gape.

**① “Huh, Tiona. Impressive. With skills like that, I bet she could even fight off a bandit or two.”**

**Go to [C-6]**

**② “Wow, what a shot! Liora’s aim is absolutely flawless!”**

**Go to [C-7]**

## [C-1] Chat at the Jewelry Store

"The person in front of that jewelry store is..."

Standing at the entrance of a well-known jewelry store on the main street was a girl with whom Mia was very well acquainted.

"Esmeralda, what are you doing here?"

"Miss Mia! What a pleasant surprise it is to meet you here!" Her longtime friend Esmeralda Etoile Greenmoon beamed in her direction. "Since you're here, would you like to look at jewels with me?"

"Jewels, you say?"

"Your birthday is coming up in the winter, right? This will help me figure out what to get you."

"It's still autumn at the moment. Isn't it a bit early to be thinking about that?"

"Certainly not. The value of a present lies not only in its inherent quality but also the time and effort that went into choosing it. And since this is your present, I will spare no expense. Because we're best friends!"

A declaration like that would give anyone a bout of the warm fuzzies. Mia could hardly walk away after such an earnest display of friendship. Besides, it might make for a good mental refresher. So she walked into the store.

"This one's very nice," said Esmeralda once they'd begun browsing. "But it's a tad pricey."

She held up a necklace with a gem the size of an egg. Mia glanced at its price.

*A-A* tad*?! This is ridiculously expensive! During the famine you could buy a third of a bag of wheat with that money!*

So shocking was the price that she almost blurted these thoughts aloud. The old Mia wouldn't have bothered to even look at the prices of accessories. The present Mia, after living through the empire's downfall, was far more prudent with her spending, purchasing little more than daily essentials. There was a damn famine coming, after all. Wasting money was out of the question.

*Preferably, I'd get Esmeralda to stop squandering her wealth too, but she's not exactly the type to listen to advice like that. If only there was a*

*clever way to persuade her...*

A small box leapt into view as she browsed. She stopped to take a closer look.

"My... These are much less expensive."

Inside the box was a jumble of small gems. The sloppy presentation certainly stood out, but even more eye-catching was their price, which was far lower than their exquisitely arranged neighbors.

"Ah, that's an assortment of small, miscellaneous gems we sell for cheap," explained the shop owner. "I heard that there are students in Saint-Noel who use these to craft handmade accessories."

"I see. That explains a lot. Interesting..."

Mia turned toward her friend.

"Look, Esmeralda, this is the kind of thing that I like."

"...This? What exactly do you mean?"

Mia grinned at the perplexed Esmeralda.

"Well, you wanted to know what I'd like for a present, right? This is it. Something that you carefully and lovingly crafted from a box of small gems."

"Huh? You mean...you want me to make it myself?"

Esmeralda blinked in bewilderment.

"Absolutely. A handmade present. One of a kind. I mean, if it's time and effort that matters, making a present would be worth far more than choosing one, right? And a gift made for me by my best friend would be something I'd wear with pride."

"Best friend..."

Esmeralda's expression brightened the instant she heard those two words.

"Consider it done, Miss Mia! I'll deliver you a masterpiece that puts even the work of professional craftsmen to shame."

Pleased by her friend's eager response, Mia nodded with satisfaction.

Once she returned to her room, Mia promptly picked up her pen.

"Why don't I write a story about an arrogant noble who's obsessed with gems?" she murmured, reflecting on her noontime encounter. "The noble keeps buying fancier and fancier jewelry, but no matter how expensive it is, she nevers feels satisfied. One day, she receives a handmade accessory from

a friend, and it touches her heart... My! I like where this is going!”

Then, after enduring the inevitable head-holding, hair-chewing, pillow-punching grind that accompanied all creative output, she managed to produce a workable draft. Fortunately, its quality was sufficient to garner Rafina’s approval, allowing Mia to breathe a sigh of relief.

Mission accomplished!

“You know,” she said to herself with a pensive smile after her draft was accepted, “the inspiration you gave me for my script, Esmeralda, might actually be the best present of all.”

As a further tidbit, the present that Esmeralda eventually delivered turned out to be a necklace. Mia didn’t wear it all the time, but every so often, she’d put it on and admire it for a while before heading out. It was, in fact, something of a favorite of hers.

*Mia’s “The Melancholy of the Gem-Loving Lady”*

End - Return to Start

## [C-2] Chat at the Dock

“The person watching the boats over there is...”

Mia recognized the girl gazing at the boats from the dock.

“Rania, what brings you here of all places?”

“Ah, Princess Mia.”

The girl was Rania Tafrif Perujin, Princess of Perujin Agricultural Country and something of a zookeeper to Mia. Why zookeeper you ask? Well, whenever she visited, she’d bring an assortment of delicacies, which she’d arrange on the table. Not long after, Mia would show up, figurative tail wagging. See? Zookeeper.

“Greetings.”

“Greetings to you as well.”

Mia curtsied before asking again.

“So, what are you doing?”

“I’m looking at the boats.”

“Ah, the boats... They certainly are interesting to look at, aren’t they? I sometimes partake in a little boat watching myself.”

Having cut her teeth on the boredom of an underground dungeon cell, Mia could kill time by counting the number of rocks or leaves in her immediate vicinity. Boats, in comparison, were a veritable circus. She could stare at them all day long.

“Actually, I was thinking, if only Perujin had sea access... We’d be able to establish ties with so many more countries.”

Turns out, Rania’s interest in boats was a lot less...flaneur.

“Sea access, huh... I get what you mean, but...” Mia consulted a mental map of the surrounding geography. “Are you planning to dig a canal to the Galilea Sea then?”

“That’s probably the most realistic option. It’s an inland sea though, so I also have ambitions in the opposite direction,” Rania said with a bright smile. “I want to see Perujin dominate all the surrounding waterways with its produce. That’s my ultimate vision.”

“My, that’s quite the expansive vision you have.”

“If it were up to me, I’d be on those boats myself, sailing to other countries and negotiating with them.”

Rania huffed out a frustrated breath with her hands on her hips, as though it took every fiber of restraint in her not to hop onto a vessel right then and there. Mia chuckled.

"It seems like you're more of an adventurer than a princess. I must admit though, it was a lot of fun to be on a boat... Hm?"

The sign of a dockside stall caught her eye. It read "Pirate Porras." They were selling long strips of some sort of fried dough made to look like cutlasses. Pirate-themed churros, basically. The look on the faces of nearby customers as they bit into the things informed Mia that she was beholding something tasty.

"My, look at that... What do you say? How about we try one for ourselves? If Perujin wants to dominate the sea trade, then I suspect researching popular products like those will be crucial."

"Mmm, good idea. I've been wondering about those things, actually. Maybe we can make them back in Perujin too..." Rania said with an eager smile.

After loading up on her internal sugar reserves with Rania, Mia returned to her room and began writing her draft.

"Those pirate porras tasted so good. Hm... How about a pirate story then? A courageous lady pirate who dominates the seas... Ooo, I like the sound of that. She'll travel from island to island— Oh, but 'pirate' doesn't have a very nice ring to it. Maybe...an intrepid outlaw? A Robin Hood of the high seas?" she wondered aloud as she recalled the conversation she'd had with Rania. "The adventures of a lady pirate who gives delicious pastries to poor children...and her hideout is an island with lots of fertile farmland..."

Thus, a story filled with Mia's personal hopes and dreams was born. It was approved by Rafina, albeit with some revisions, and the play was duly staged. Interestingly, on the day of the theater festival, Rania could be seen sneaking around the venue. What was she doing, you ask?

Well, let's just say that a couple of curious showgoers became inaugural taste testers for the first-ever Perujin-made pirate porras. The Perujin princess, as it turns out, could be quite the go-getter.

*Rania the Lady Pirate and Her Dream of Pirate Porras*

End - Return to Start

## [C-3] Investigate the Bookshelf

"...My, I think I feel some kind of mystical aura radiating from that bookshelf."

Driven by pure instinct, Mia approached the shelf, whereupon she discovered...

"Hm? Chloe?"

...Her friend, Chloe Forkroad, standing there absorbed in a book.

"Princess Mia?" Chloe said, looking up in surprise. "What are you here for?"

"That's my question. Well, then again..." Mia glanced behind her at the staircase. "Maybe not. Did you finish reading all the books upstairs and come down here to find more?"

Chloe chuckled at the ludicrous suggestion and shook her head.

"No, there's something I want to figure out, so I'm doing some research. What about you, Princess Mia?"

Mia briefly explained her situation.

"I see. A play for the student council..." said Chloe, crossing her arms in thought.

"Do you know of any books that might be useful for me?"

Mia figured that Chloe, a professional reader of books, had to be more knowledgeable about such things than herself. She even briefly entertained the thought of offloading the job to her entirely before deciding that she'd made too confident a promise to Rafina to back out now. There were times in one's life where one's back was against the wall, and the only way backward was to climb it. This was one of those times.

"Well, actually..." Chloe hesitantly produced a book. "I read this book recently, and..."

Mia glanced at it, finding it familiar. It was a book she'd seen Chloe reading before. The title, "Hyakumonogatari" didn't mean much, but the subtitle, "One Hundred Supernatural Tales" told her all she needed to know!

*Uh oh. This is one of those scary books. I know it is. It's going to keep me up for nights on end if I read it!*

Mia's spookiness sensors promptly raised the alarm, and she drew back, giving Chloe a dubious look. Chloe, for her part, didn't notice and

continued talking about her book.

“This is a collection of scary stories from a country in the east. Many of them are about karma and people getting their just deserts, where monsters appear to punish the wicked for their evil deeds. If you look through it, I think you’ll find some that fit Miss Rafina’s tastes.”

“B-But they’re... *spoopy*— I mean, spooky stories, right?” she said, fear causing her tongue to trip over itself.

“Oh, don’t worry, Princess Mia. It won’t be scary because you’ll be the one writing the story.”

That got a gasp out of Mia, who realized that Chloe was right. She’d be writing a scary story, yes, but it’d be *her* scary story. She couldn’t possibly scare herself with her own writing. Impressed by this profound insight, Mia nodded with appreciation.

“Also, when you’re reading something for research,” Chloe added, “you tend to be more objective. I find it’s hard to get scared by a story when you’re analyzing it and taking notes.”

“Yes, yes. What you say makes perfect sense. If I read it as research for my script, it probably won’t be all that scary.”

Convinced by this logic, Mia agreed to borrow the book from Chloe. Upon returning to her room, she promptly flipped it open...only to discover that logic had thoroughly failed her. Needless to say, scary things are scary, no matter your reasons for reading about them. What might surprise you, however, is the fact that she did not stop right then and there. Despite her fear, she placed her finger at the corner of the page, preparing to flip to the next one. What drove her to this incredible feat, you ask?

Well, it was neither a morbid curiosity of the supernatural nor an unshakable sense of duty to keep her word and produce a script. It was the good old sunk cost fallacy. Having already spooked herself with the first few pages, she refused to close the book there and then, for doing so would mean all the terror she’d endured would have been for naught! If she was going to be frightened, then she was going to get her fright’s worth in story ideas. Again, there were times in one’s life when one’s back was against the wall, and the only way backward was to climb it. So climb it she would. With the wide-eyed mania of a desperate gambler trying to recoup her losses, she flipped the page and—

“...M-Maybe I should just ask Chloe to help.”

The ensuing page included an illustration of a terribly scary monster, and her determination promptly wilted. Instead, she begged her book-loving friend for help.

Which resulted in said friend reading a ton more stories to her, all of the spooky sort. Ultimately, she did manage to write up a script, but it came at the cost of many nights spent in Anne's bed.

*Mia and Chloe's Scary Tales From the East*
End - Return to Start

## [C-4] Investigate the Ancient Tomes

"...Hm, I see a lot of ancient tomes over in that area. I should go take a look."

It's not like she had any better ideas anyway. When she went over, however, she happened upon a familiar girl with red hair.

"My, Ruby, what are you doing here in the archives?"

Ruby, apparently engrossed in a book, looked up with a start at Mia's voice.

"O-Oh, Your Highness... Greetings."

"Greetings indeed. Coming to a place like this to read though? You must be a more avid reader than I thought."

"Uh, well... There are some books here you can't find anywhere else."

"I see. What exactly are you reading, by the way?"

"Ah—"

Ruby stiffened, the implications of answering that question suddenly dawning on her. Mia gave her a puzzled frown.

"Is something the matter? Oh, let me guess. You're going to be joining the Princess Guard, so you wanted to do preparation in private beforehand. I assume you're studying up on small-scale squad-based tactics or something?"

"No, I— Uh, well... I-It's something like that, I guess. Nothing you'd be interested in, I promise."

She tried to hide the book behind her, but her flustered motion caused it to slip from her fingers.

"Ah—"

It fell to the ground, landing at her feet with its cover up. On it was the title, "Romance Handbook: Cooking."

A long silence ensued. As awkwardness filled the musty air, Ruby cracked first.

"...Okay, let me just say one thing, Your Highness." She straightened, speaking in a sober, dignified tone. "I have no need for books when it comes to strategy and tactics. For as long as I can remember, I've been trained in the art of command. Even now, I keep up with all the latest research. Never in my life have I stopped studying military theory, and I

never will, because I am a Redmoon."

"I see. That certainly stands to reason."

"I go to books for things I don't know. To seek new knowledge. That's why I'm holed up here in the archives."

"To learn how to be a girlfriend?"

"What?! You got a problem with that?!" she snapped, erasing any pretense of dignity.

Perhaps her inner warrior got the best of her. Sensing that she was being backed into a corner, she immediately went on the offensive. After all, no self-respecting Redmoon would go down without a fight. This reaction amused Mia, who broke into a laugh.

"My, Ruby, we haven't talked much before, but I must say... You're surprisingly adorable."

"Wha—"

Red-faced and at a loss for words, Ruby could only stare.

"Oh, I should mention that I'm quite interested in such things as well. Once you're done reading, perhaps we can sit down and discuss? I'll invite Esmeralda too. What do you say, hm?"

Slowly, Ruby's expression softened, bewilderment giving way to a meek smile.

"I...would love that, Your Highness."

Back in her room, Mia promptly began writing her script. The encounter with Ruby had given her a great idea.

"When it comes to stories, nothing beats good old romance. The deeper the better. In fact, I think the theme will be pure love. The really sweet, sentimental kind. The main character will be a noble girl. She's a bit of a tomboy, but deep down, she's an innocent young soul who's enamored with the very thought of love..."

Fortunately, the momentum just kept building as she wrote, and it wasn't long before she handed a completed draft to Rafina. The story told of a tragic love between a star-crossed pair whose romance crossed class boundaries. Through their travails emerged an exploration of what it meant to truly love someone... Upon reaching the end, Rafina found herself nodding in admiration.

"...This is incredible, Mia. There's so much depth to the romance. I can

only imagine you drew upon a wealth of personal experience."

The potential birth of a grave misunderstanding aside, it was a job well done for Mia the budding playwright. Later on, Ruby would watch the performance and almost have an aneurysm, but that's a story for another day.

*Princess Mia... Ends Up Writing a Love Story!*

End - Return to Start

## [C-5] Investigate the Dark Spot

“There’s a dark spot behind those bookshelves... How intriguing!”

Mia narrowed her eyes at the backmost part of the archives, where haphazardly arranged bookshelves threw a veil of darkness over an area.

“I wonder if it’s hiding anything interesting. Maybe I’ll find a book on the ground that gives me some ideas. I mean, it’s certainly wishful thinking, but...” she said to herself as she approached.

“Eeek!”

She jumped as a small shadow popped out of the darkness. Her legs failed her as she landed, forcing her to shuffle backward on her bum while whimpering in terror. Then, the shadow spoke.

“Huh? Miss Mia?”

“...Eh?”

She stopped her gluteal retreat and looked up to find a perplexed Bel standing over her.

“What are you doing here?” asked the young girl.

“Th-That’s *my* question!” exclaimed Mia, her voice cracking.

“Mmm...” Bel adopted a pensive pose. “It’s supposed to be a secret, but since you’re special, I’ll let you in on it. There’s actually a hidden passage here.”

“...What hidden passage?”

Mia followed Bel into the dark spot where, true to the young girl’s word, she found a hole in the wall. The opening was small, and she’d have to crouch down to fit through.

“Huh, who would have thought there’d be a passage in a place like this? Where does it lead?”

She poked her head in but couldn’t see the exit. The darkness certainly made it hard to see, but it was also long, extending past the limit of her vision.

“Lots of places,” answered Bel. “It leads to rooms in the girls’ dormitory. You can also get to the boys’ dormitory. There was even this one time when I got out in a place I’d never seen before.”

“My... What a fascinating passage. That explains a lot. So this is how you managed to hide for so long without anyone finding you,” said Mia

before she frowned. “But why is it here? A secret escape route during emergencies, maybe?”

“It’s a mystery to me too. Oh, I should mention that while I was hiding in here, I felt something weird...”

“Oh? What was weird?”

“I felt someone’s eyes on me...like I was being watched. Of course, whenever I turned around, I’d never find anyone, and judging by the amount of dust that had built up, it didn’t seem like anyone else was around, but...” Suddenly, Bel looked up at Mia. “Maybe there’s a creepy monster that lives down here by itself, and when night falls, it crawls out of the passage and roams the academy...”

Bel’s attempt at an intimidating voice made Mia burst into laughter.

“Oh please, save it for the campfire. What, is that the latest fad in your class or something? The Subterranean Stalker of Saint-Noel? And you actually believed it? Ah, you’re such a baby, Bel.”

After chuckling to herself in amusement, Mia rubbed her chin.

“I must say though, for a plot idea, it’s not half bad. A mysterious monster hiding under Saint-Noel... For example, the story could be about a student who’s an outcast in her class. She meets the monster, and it tries to help her by stopping all the people from tormenting her...except it does so through a series of murders. In order to make it function as a morality play, I can work in a message about the meaning of true love or something...”

Having found inspiration in the unlikeliest of places, Mia promptly set pen to parchment. Fortunately, her brain juices flowed freely, filling the pages with her fantasies. Before long, she held a completed draft. However, when she brought it to Rafina, she was met with an unexpected response.

“I see. So you know...about the monster...”

Mia froze for a second, blinking blankly.

“...Eh?”

“...Hm?”

Rafina blinked back at her, seemingly confused as well. They stared at each other for a while. After an awkward silence, Rafina burst into a short giggle.

“Oh, Mia. It’s a joke. I was joking.”

“A-Ah, I see. It was just a joke. Haha.”

“Yes, of course. Just a joke.”

Rafina smiled, but Mia couldn’t help but think that her eyes looked uncomfortably serious.

That night, Anne just so happened to have some work to do, leaving Mia alone with Bel in her room. She looked at Bel, who was sitting in bed combing her hair, and said, “Uh, Bel, why don’t we sleep in the same bed tonight?”

“Huh? Why?”

Bel tilted her head, puzzled.

“W-Well,” said Mia with a nervous laugh. “I feel like it’s been too long since we’ve had a good chat and, uh, as grandmother and granddaughter, I think it’s good for us to catch up every now and then.”

*Mia, Bel, and the Monster of Saint-Noel*

End - Return to Start

## [C-6] Talk to Tiona

“Huh, Tiona. Impressive. With skills like that, I bet she could even fight off a bandit or two.”

Mia watched as Tiona swung her wooden practice sword downward, the motion blending into a horizontal swipe before she spun her body around to slash at an imagined foe behind her. Her movements were basic but she performed them smoothly, turning a sequence of fundamentals into an elegant sword dance. Only after she’d sheathed her sword did Mia approach her.

“Greetings, Tiona.”

“Ah, Your Highness!”

She hastily began to curtsy, but Mia stopped her with a smile.

“No need for formalities. I must say though, I’d heard you knew how to wield a sword, but I had no idea you practiced so seriously. You really put your back into it, don’t you? Do you do this every day?”

“Yes, I’ve been practicing like this ever since I was young. It’s just become a habit by now, honestly...”

“My, you must be very strong then.”

A thought occurred to Mia.

*I never looked at it this way before, but it’s actually pretty cool to be able to swing a sword around...and there’s always the chance I’ll awaken some latent talent and become a master swordswoman. Imagine if I end up stronger than even Dion. Nothing would ever scare me again.*

It wasn’t a smart thought though.

“Say, Tiona, would you mind if I tried using that?”

“Huh? Uh, if you’d like. Go ahead.”

Tiona hesitated for a second before shaking her head and holding out her wooden practice sword.

“Hm, it’s not very heavy,” Mia said as she took it in both hands.

She swung it a few times. Then, she lifted it high above her head, mimicking Abel’s stance, before letting out what was probably supposed to be a battle cry.

“Waaargh!”

Her sword flashed—metaphorically—as she brought it down, brown

blade blurring with surprising speed. It was, by all measures, an impressive swing, and she even accomplished it without the crippling twang in her back muscles that often resulted from ill-advised attempts at athletics.

"My..." Her eyes widened at her own feat. "Did I just..."

As it turns out, she'd unknowingly shaped up from all that horse riding she'd been doing lately. Her body was, in fact, now capable of handling intensive exercise.

"I think I have a knack for this."

There was something very satisfying about a good swing, and Mia was feeling that satisfaction right now.

"Ohoho, with a swing like this, I bet I'll be able to cut down foes by the dozen."

She proceeded to imagine herself, sword in hand, carving her way through hordes of faceless enemy mooks. The fantasy then shifted to her defeating Remno's elite warrior, the Adamantine Spear, in a duel before facing down Dion in a solo bout.

"Hey, Tiona, could you teach me how to use a sword?"

"Huh? Teach Your Highness? You want to learn swordsmanship?"

"Yes. I don't want to ask one of the Guard because Father might catch wind of it and throw a fit. It's too much of a headache to deal with him. It'd be a lot better if you taught me. What do you say?" she asked while striking a couple more poses with the wooden sword. "I think I might be a natural, honestly."

Tiona gave her an appropriately concerned look.

"I...suppose I could. All right. If that's your wish, then I'll try my best."

"My! Really?"

Mia beamed as Tiona meekly nodded.

"The first thing I have to teach you then...is how not to cut your hand."

"...Really? My own hand? That seems unlikely."

She frowned, figuring she couldn't possibly be so clumsy as to run a blade across her own flesh. Tiona, however, continued soberly.

"I mean it. The most dangerous moment is when you sheath your sword. It's easy to cut your palm by accident," she said, holding out her own palm to demonstrate. "Right here between the thumb and index finger. You slide the sword in, and it just slices straight through this part."

"S-Straight through..."

“Yes. A lot of blood gushes out, and it hurts a lot too.”

Mia almost saw the flesh parting before she vigorously shook the image out of her mind, only for Tiona to induce an even more gruesome vision.

“If you’re not careful, the gash can go down to the bone. I’ve heard of people whose fingers just fell right off—”

“Stop! Th-That’s quite enough! I, um, have reconsidered. Swordsmanship seems a tad too difficult for me,” she stammered, face pale.

It occurred to Mia that she hated pain. The business of cutting and being cut were beyond her capabilities.

“I see.” Tiona grinned. “I think that’s for the best. If there’s any fighting to be done, you can just leave it to your guards. Or me. That’s what all this practice I do is for, after all.”

That night...

“Hm... Still, a story about a lady with a sword beating evil foes does sound pretty exciting.”

An idea came to her.

“I know! I’ll make the main character a swordswoman, and I’ll base her off Tiona. In that case, her enemy will have to be...me, I guess? Which means the message would be...”

She wrote and mumbled and mumbled and wrote. Eventually, a completed script lay before her. It told of a noble girl whose father was killed and the tale of her revenge, ultimately delivering a poignant message about the futility of vengeance. Tiona was cast in the lead role, and Mia played the villain. The rehearsals even led to them becoming better friends, but those details will have to be saved for a later occasion.

*The Friendship Between the Vengeful Lady Knight and the Guillotine Princess*

End - Return to Start

## [C-7] Talk to Liora

“Wow, what a shot! Liora’s aim is absolutely flawless!”

Mia let out a whoop of admiration as Liora put on a jaw-dropping show of masterful archery before her very eyes. The arrow sprung from her bow. It flew toward its target and struck it perfectly on...the edge, bouncing backward into the air. At the apex of its curve, a second arrow loosed from her bow snapped it right in half. Liora had purposefully ricocheted her first arrow off the target to strike it with her second. It was, frankly, a ridiculous feat, and even the archery-ignorant Mia could appreciate the sheer mastery on display.

“What terrifying skill... Just the thought of being in her sights sends a chill down my spine.”

“Ah... Your Highness...”

Noticing Mia’s presence, Liora put down her bow and strode over with brisk steps.

“Greetings... Are you looking for Miss Tiona?”

“No, I was just walking around, and I saw you do...*that*. It was amazing.”

“...Huh? Do what?”

Mia smiled wryly at the genuine confusion on Liora’s face.

“The thing you did with the bow and arrows, of course. I didn’t even know something like that was possible.”

“That was...normal.”

“Hardly. I’ve never seen anything like it. What a sight that was. What a sight *you* were!.”

Liora fidgeted uncomfortably as Mia showered her with compliments.

“That’s very flattering... But too much... It’s embarrassing...” she said blushing bashfully before adding, “I-I can also... Do things like this.”

She launched an arrow up into the air and hit it with a second one as it came down.

“Wow! That’s incredible! You got it perfectly!”

Encouraged by Mia’s applause, Liora proceeded to unveil a string of trick shots, each more impressive than the last.

*You know,* thought Mia as she watched, *seeing this, it’s a miracle I*

*managed to survive long enough to make it to the guillotine.*

After being thoroughly mesmerized by Liora's impromptu archery show, Mia returned to her room.

"Hm, What about a story about an archer girl who brings justice to bad people?"

She promptly tried developing the idea.

"The main character belongs to a clan that lives in the forest. They hunt to survive, so they all use bows on a daily basis. Oh, I should make it so they have a secret hideout in the forest. As for the villain... An evil king sounds good, I think? He'll be making the people suffer by imposing heavy taxes or something..."

As an amateur author, Mia tended to include elements from reality without any embellishment.

"It feels too cruel to have the villain be executed at the guillotine, so let's tone that down a bit... Actually, if I make myself the main character, then I can keep the execution. As long as I'm not the one getting my head chopped off!"

She wrote and wrote, ultimately pulling her first-ever all-nighter to finish the story. Triumphant but sleep-deprived, she shambled over to Rafina and handed her the completed draft.

"I see. So it's a story about a young woman trying to make the world a better place." Rafina gave a pleased nod after reading the script. "A captivating main character like this girl might convince the audience to reflect on their own actions and make sure they don't become like the evil lord in the story. If she gets people in power thinking about how the masses feel, then the story has certainly done its job. Mmm, I think you've written a fine play, Mia!"

So, Mia's script was successfully turned into a stage production. Initially she'd thought to make herself the main character, but the archery advisor, Liora, turned out to be a nightmarishly strict coach that sent Mia fleeing for the hills on the first day. As for what exactly transpired during their first and only training session... Well, you'll simply have to use your imagination.

*Liora Hood*

End - Return to Start

## [D-1] Peek at Elise's Drafts

"I should take a peek at Elise's drafts, maybe? I might find some inspiration in there."

When it came to writing scripts, Mia was naturally going to rely on her personally employed author for help. No one enjoyed the worlds Elise crafted more than she did. So, she sought the drafts Elise had sent her, only...

"Augh, I can't find them. Did I leave them back at the capital?"

...They weren't there. She'd either left them back home or returned them to Elise already.

"What kind of story was it again? Hmm... Say, Anne, do you have a moment?"

"Sure. What is it?"

She gestured for Anne to join her on her bed before explaining the situation.

"You see, Miss Rafina asked me to write a script for a play, and I agreed, so I'm looking for ideas. Do you remember that story Elise wrote about a pair of sisters?"

"A pair of sisters?"

"Yes. If memory serves, the older sister was gentle and caring while the younger sister was brimming with curiosity, and the story was about the adventures they had."

Mia wasn't actually holding out much hope. She knew that Anne sometimes paid very little attention to Elise's stories, resulting in a spotty grasp of their contents, which was made worse by the fact that she'd then use her dubious memory of the stories as a reference to solve real-life problems. Nevertheless, she still asked.

"Does that ring any bells?"

"Do you mean the story about the merchant sisters? They'd go from town to town and solve the problems they found there."

"Yes! That's it! Keep going. Tell me how the story went."

"Sure."

Fortunately, Anne seemed to remember all the details of this particular story, allowing her to close her eyes and promptly begin a smooth retelling.

Mia laid down on the bed and listened.

The story was about a pair of merchant sisters. They were very close, and they traveled to all sorts of towns and villages. Wherever they stopped, they'd solve the various problems of the townspeople. The story also included narrative flourishes such as the goods purchased from a previous village being used to solve a problem in the next.

In the beginning, Mia simply enjoyed listening to the story.

*Yes, yes. That's how it went.*

Events proceeded at a brisk pace as the two sisters tackled one problem after another. The younger one tended to be a bit careless, often forcing the older one to follow up with some quick thinking. The interplay of trouble and resolution kept her on the edge of her proverbial seat. As the story went on, however, her focus began to shift, and the experience gained a newfound poignancy. When Anne finished, Mia let out a nostalgic sigh.

"Listening to you tell me stories like this... It really takes me back."

She couldn't help but recall her time in the dungeon. Back then, the only voices she heard were reproachful ones, their words bitter and hurtful. Anne alone was the exception, her voice offered warmth and solace. The stories she told were equally comforting. Once, Mia had fallen asleep in the middle of a story. She'd closed her eyes in the gentle cradle of Anne's voice, but when she opened them again, Anne was nowhere to be found. She woke alone to the chilly emptiness of her cell. The despair she felt then had etched itself into her soul. From that day on, she'd sworn never to fall asleep when Anne was telling a story.

That worry was now a matter of the past. Her brain knew it for a fact, but her heart still had to ask.

"Tell me, Anne, if I fall asleep right now, will you stay by my side?"

"What kind of question is that?" asked Anne, looking utterly baffled. "Of course I will, milady. Why wouldn't I? Until you send me away, I'll always be right beside you!"

The sureness of her voice drew a sigh of relief from Mia.

"Oh, I have one more request, if it's not too much to ask. From now on, could you tell me Elise's stories like this every once in a while?" Mia asked, deciding to indulge a little.

"Sure? I can do that." Anne lifted a puzzled eyebrow before asking with a gentle smile, "So, did you find the story useful?"

“Ah, right. As a matter of fact, I think this story will work as is. I need to ask Elise if I can use it as soon as possible.”

“I’m sure she’ll say yes, milady. If anything she’ll be overjoyed that you want to borrow it.”

The following day, Mia took Elise’s story to Rafina, who okayed it immediately. Soon after, preparations were underway.

And that’s how the first stage play written by Elise Littstein, one of the most distinguished authors in the history of the continent, had its inaugural performance at Saint-Noel Academy.

*Anne, Elise, and One Thousand and One Nights*
End - Return to Start

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by Nozomu Mochitsuki

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